THE STORY OF BLESSED JOHN FISHER

NOEL MACDONALD WILBY

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BLESSED JOHN FISHER

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BY

NOEL MACDONALD WILBY

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FOREWORD

AS there appears to be no short, popular life of Blessed John Fisher in circulation, it has been suggested that such a book would fill the gap between Father Bridgett's standard biography (first published by Messrs. Burns and Oates in 1888, with Cardinal Manning's Imprimatur, and now in its fourth edition) and the popular Catholic Truth Society pamphlet by Mgr. Cologan.

It is hoped that the defects of this attempt to meet the need may be outweighed by the interest which the great figure of Blessed John Fisher must always arouse, however unskilfully it may be drawn. Any reader thus brought to know and honour this illustrious martyr—and so further the cause of his canonisation—is asked to say a prayer for his grateful client,

THE AUTHOR.

Feast of Blessed Thomas More, 1928.

PREFACE

THE author of this little book has honoured me by asking me to write a few words of preface. My only claim to this honour is the fact that it was at my suggestion that the book was written. My desire, of course, was to help make Blessed John Fisher better known, and so to arouse more devotion to him. And, now that I have read the book, I am confident that this will be the effect of it.

If the cause of the canonisation of this glorious martyr and his companion in suffering, Blessed Thomas More, is to go forward, it is above all things necessary that more popular devotion to them should be aroused. But, quite apart from the Cause, few things could be more useful for the Church in England to-day than the spread of devotion to these two "strong and mighty pillars." Only it must be the right sort of devotion. There is a tendency among many good Catholics to think that devotion to the saints consists in asking them to obtain favours for them by their intercession. Now, we all know that in fact the saints do obtain such favours for their devout clients. But

we must always remember that God grants these favours for two chief reasons. One is to testify to the sanctity of his servants. That is why miracles are required for canonisation. They are the evidence of God's own approval. But the other great reason is to encourage us to imitate the saints. Devotion without some sort of imitation is not worth very much.

How can we imitate Blessed John Fisher? There are two facts about him which stand out prominently. He was a "golden priest," and he was a martyr. But few are called to be martyrs, and comparatively few to be priests. We must, therefore, look deeper, and see the great principles of his life, which all can imitate. The readers of this little book should have no difficulty in seeing what they were. The most obvious were loyalty to the Holy See, refusal to compromise, faithfulness to duty, and a cheerful carrying of the Cross. We live in times very different from those of Blessed John Fisher. He saw the first onrush of the flood that overwhelmed the Church of Christ in this country, and nearly wiped it out of existence. We witness its "Second Spring," its astonishing revival and regrowth. But, if that revival is to go on and prosper, exactly

those same qualities, which we see in him, are required in us. We must be staunchly loyal to the See of St Peter, the divinely appointed centre of unity and strength. We must be loyal to the principles of that Faith, for which the martyrs died, steadily resisting all the insidious temptations to compromise with the ways of the semipagan world around us. We must be faithful to our duties, small and great. And, above all, we must be ready cheerfully to carry whatever cross our Lord is pleased to lay upon us, remembering that his chosen instruments, through whom his redemptive power works most effectively, are not those who do brilliant deeds that the world admires, but the humble souls who willingly accept whatever sufferings come upon them, and offer them to God in union with our Lord's Passion for his glory and the salvation of souls. I can only wish nothing better than that all who read this story of Blessed John Fisher may be filled with new zeal to strive to follow him in these things.

G. J. MacGILLIVRAY.

FISHER HOUSE,
CAMBRIDGE,

Feast of the Purification of our Lady, 1929.

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THE STORY OF BLESSED JOHN FISHER

CHAPTER I

BOYHOOD

JOHN FISHER was born about the year 1468 or 1469, during the troublous times of the Wars of the Roses. The first seventeen years of his studious youth were those in which England was rent with strife, and when the accession of Henry VII brought peace, the future martyr was at Cambridge, studying for the priesthood.

England was then solidly Catholic, but already the seeds of evil were sown. The horrors and confusion of civil war had lowered the morale of clergy and laity, preaching had fallen into neglect, and—in Fisher's own words—there were "but few righteous people in the Church militant" in England.

"In the days of the Apostles," he said, "were no chalices of gold, but many golden priests; now be many chalices of gold, but

almost no golden priests." His great ambition was to remedy this; and his life was largely spent in labouring to multiply golden priests by teaching, the foundation of ecclesiastical colleges, devotion to his episcopal duties, but, above all, by prayer.

The supreme teaching of his own golden example was the most powerful human means he employed; his whole life was, unconsciously, one long preparation for martyrdom. His devotion to learning, his ascetic life, his noble friendship with the Lady Margaret, were all made to serve the one great end he had so much at heart.

There is a remarkably prophetic passage in one of his sermons:

"Set in thy Church strong and mighty pillars, that may suffer and endure great labours—watching, poverty, thirst, hunger, cold, and heat—which also shall not fear the threatenings of princes, persecution, neither death, but always persuade and think with themselves to suffer, with a good will, slanders, shame, and all kinds of torments, for the glory and laud of thy Holy Name. By this manner, good Lord, the truth of thy Gospel shall be preached throughout all the world. . . .

"Oh! if it would please our Lord God

to show this great goodness and mercy in our days, the memorial of his so doing ought, of very right, to be left in perpetual writing, never to be forgotten of all our posterity, that every generation might love and worship him time without end."

These words, as his biographer observes, are an unconscious revelation; and, coming from the depths of his heart, describe himself, his aspirations, and resolutions. But he was not destined to see his desire realised. In his old age he saw Catholic England in ruin; he could not save it. But he did a greater thing; he bore witness to the truth with his blood, and so became one of the first of that long line of illustrious martyrs who kept the Faith alive throughout the dark days of persecution, and handed on the torch to us. The blood of the martyrs was ever the seed of the Church, and we are the spiritual heirs of the martyrs.

John Fisher, a Yorkshireman by birth, was born at Beverley about the year 1468 or 1469, the son of Robert Fisher, a mercer, and Agnes, his wife. The future martyr was one of four children, and the father died when they were very young. His will, quoted fully in Father Bridgett's biography, is a model of simple, practical piety, and

proves him a conscientious, generous man. Beginning in the good old Catholic way, he bequeaths his soul to God, and his body "to be buried in the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Beverley before the Crucifix." Legacies are apportioned for each of the almshouses in Beverley, for tithes forgotten, for the fabric of the Church of St John of Beverley, and St Peter's Cathedral of York, for the Franciscans of Beverley, and for his relatives. Provision is made for Masses for his soul, and for the maintenance of his wife and children; his brother's debt is forgiven, and a present made over and above the sum remitted.

Robert Fisher's widow married a second husband named White, and they had three sons, John, Thomas, and Richard; also a daughter, named Elizabeth, who afterwards became a Dominican nun at Dartford, in her brother's diocese of Rochester. It was for her that he wrote two treatises when he was in prison. The little we know of this family shows them to have been united in life-long affection.

It is most probable that John Fisher began his education at the grammar school attached to the collegiate church of St John

of Beverley. Possibly he was named after this great saint-bishop of York, who in his lifetime was particularly devoted to the care of students, and who numbered among his pupils both his own successor and the Venerable Bede. In any case, this saint must have been one of the chief formative influences of John Fisher's early life. His shrine at Beverley was a famous place of pilgrimage, and an important factor in the splendid services carried out in the Minster to which the ancient grammar school was attached.

The attempt to reconstruct the moulding circumstances of John Fisher's boyhood gives us a vivid picture of the Church and the State happily yoked in Merrie England. Robert, the mercer's son, was a member of a strong and capable community—the men of Beverley, most of whom followed the good old Yorkshire industry of cloth-weaving. And excellent stuff they made; the scarlet cloth of Beverley had been famous in earlier days, and when John Fisher was a boy cloth-making was still the great local industry. The men among whom he grew up followed this good, honest trade and governed their civic affairs sturdily, for Beverley, the principal town of the East

Riding, had long been one of the leading English boroughs, with considerable powers of self-government.

The master of the school, ten years before John's birth, was a burgess, one of the leading townsmen who kept the keys of the town chest, and co-steward of the great Gild of St John of Beverley—to which the martyr's father doubtless belonged. The schoolmaster's house was in the Keldgate, and the corporation only sold it a few years ago.

But the civic life of the town was rooted and founded in the religious. Significantly, the great historic Minster church predominated over the roofs of Beverley, enshrining the remains of its saint. Next in importance came the venerable grammar school, with traditions dating back to the tenth century and King Athelstan. It appears that "the school was not confined to mere choristers" —there was a song-school—"or poor clerics, but was attended by the same classes that now send their sons to grammar or public schools. The power of conferring degrees in grammar is noteworthy, as degrees in grammar at Oxford are not mentioned till a much later date."[1] The ancient rights

[1] *Victoria County History*, vol. i,

of the school were strongly established, and amounted to a monopoly of teaching in that neighbourhood. Beverley provided the elements of a sound classical education.

Such, then, were the surroundings of John Fisher's boyhood. A thriving medieval town, sturdy north-countrymen, a happy home with mother, step-father, brothers, and sister. But the greater part of his time was spent in school and choir.

Historical records give glimpses of that rich ceremonial which lay at the very heart of life in Tudor Beverley. The processions in the Minster are mentioned again and again; the duties of the sacristan, whose chief care, next to the altars, was the shrine of St John; the song-school under the precentor; the chancellor, *ex-officio* master of the school; the various prebendal altars, each with a cure of souls attached, St Martin, St Andrew, St Blaise, and the rest. The service of St Nicholas, performed by the schoolmaster of Beverley on St Nicholas' Day, December 6, when the future martyr may have been boy-bishop!

Thus John Fisher grew up in a deeply Catholic atmosphere, accustomed from childhood to take part in the ceremonial splendour of the Church's ritual fully

carried out in fit surroundings; living in the shadow of his name-saint's shrine and busy in school.

That daily companionship of the liturgy, and the invisible friendship of the patron-saint—and that there must have been a real friendship between them, who can doubt?—formed the background of the boy's spiritual life. Its deepest lessons were put to the test in school hours. Some specimens of John Fisher's early writing can be seen to this day in the proctor's books at Cambridge; it is remarkably good, and his "elegant Latinity" augurs a diligent laying of the foundations of learning.

He left home and school for Cambridge University when only about fourteen years old, according to the custom of the time. One pictures the big, studious lad, tall for his age and slight, giving promise of yet greater height—his biographer has described him minutely—dark-haired, dark-eyed, strong-featured, and quiet of manner. A thoughtful boy, looking forward to his new life at Cambridge with all a boy's love of travel and adventure, and a student's quenchless thirst for knowledge. It must indeed have been a tremendous adventure to any north-country lad, whose idea of

earthly greatness was probably limited to the city of York. The distance alone was considerable, and beyond lay the unknown world, where this home-loving boy would be a stranger and alone.

Yet underlying all this was a higher ambition, the master purpose of John Fisher's life. All through those quiet, busy years at Beverley his deep, simple piety had been growing, fed by the living pageantry of the liturgical year, as he took part with his schoolfellows in the stately services in the Minster. Evidently his was a call to the priesthood heard and followed with unswerving loyalty from early youth. It was pre-eminently this rock-like quality of faithfulness that distinguished this 'golden priest' through life, and ultimately prepared him for a martyr's death. He understood the value of perfection in little things; and the solid excellence of his school work was an augury of the future.

The last morning at home comes. John has already taken leave of his school, and for the first time has tasted the anguish of parting; he has heard the last Mass with his mother and family in the great church familiar to him from childhood. High hopes

and resolutions fill his heart. For many weeks past Robert the mercer's son has been a big man in his own little world; the bright particular star of his school, the favoured of fortune setting out for the famous University, surrounded by the interest and well-wishing of friends who have watched him grow up, and the half-envying admiration of his schoolfellows. But it is only now, when he is actually leaving home, parting with his mother and family, that John discovers how young he is, and how huge and cold the glittering new world outside into which he is adventuring—alone. His mother is busy with the final preparations for the journey, packing the plentiful provisions her skilled north-country housewifery concocted so well; putting up the bundle of stout, simple clothing she had been preparing these many weeks past, careful to include the bundle of books he loved so much.

The last moment comes, farewells, and the mother's last blessing. John sets out bravely, unflinching as ever; his mother stands looking after the son she has given to God, thinking how proud his father would be if he were standing by her then. She would pray for her boy always. Had

she, like many another good mother, any inkling of the future—that this son of hers would one day adorn so brilliantly the Church he went to serve? Who shall say?

CHAPTER II

EARLY YEARS AT CAMBRIDGE

THERE is a tradition that John Fisher's first home at Cambridge was the hostel known as God's House. However this may be, it is certain that he soon entered Michaelhouse, under the care of William de Melton, Fellow, and afterwards Master, of the House.

Michaelhouse was the oldest college in the University after Peterhouse. Founded in 1324 by Hervey de Stanton, Chancellor of the Exchequer to Edward II and Canon of York and Wells, it was intended solely for the higher education of the secular clergy; it was absorbed into Trinity College by Henry VIII, "that munificent donor of other people's property," and there is a tradition that the great kitchen of Trinity was the hall of Michaelhouse. The 'Scholars of St Michael' were attached to the church of that name, where they had special duties to perform. Securely established in the ascetic seclusion of his college, young John Fisher could pursue his studies for the priesthood protected in some measure from the crude turbulence of his new sur-

roundings, which formed a strong contrast to his school and home life at Beverley.

Student life at a medieval University might well be described as an ordeal for the survival of the fittest. A floating population of students, from the age of fourteen or fifteen and upwards, of all nationalities, classes, and types, thronged the University, frequently waging war on the townsmen to the extent of bloodshed and even death, finding lodgings where they could, enjoying an amazing liberty for their years, and choosing their own masters. Colleges were few, and admission to them was the privilege of a minority of promising students—who must be poor, so well did our Catholic forefathers understand the relative values of learning and wealth. The majority of students were very poor, and lodged in the various hostels, or in the crowded, rickety tenements of the townsmen's dwellings. Books were rare luxuries; and some of the lads had to walk from their distant homes. It was no uncommon thing for a student to beg on the highways; and there is a probability that the Long Vacation originated for the purpose of letting such poor scholars help the farmers during the harvest.

The exceeding liveliness of such a turbu-

lent assembly of sturdy youth, newly liberated from schooldays, often presented a serious problem to the authorities; and the annals of our ancient Universities make exciting reading. First, perhaps, as a fruitful source of discord, came nationality; the students were grouped into 'nations,' a distinction applying even to those from the north and south of Britain. Banded together by common ties, alone understanding one another's dialect, each 'nation' fought fiercely with the rest, as if in sympathy with the times; for it was not until John Fisher had spent two years at the University that the Wars of the Roses ended on Bosworth Field in 1485.

Latin was the common speech, and, indeed, an essential of intercourse among the heterogeneous mass of students. French was occasionally used as well, but Latin was a necessity.

The respective rights of University and town gave rise to another constant warfare; and the 'Town and Gown' riots often resulted in serious damage to property, limbs, and even to loss of life. There seems to have been little exaggeration in the typical picture of the extreme hardships of student life drawn by Erasmus in his

famous description of the College de Montaigu, Paris; the damp and cold, the diet of rotten eggs and sour wine, the sleeping on floors, and similar horrors, which often ruined the boys' health for life.

But at Michaelhouse John Fisher would be sheltered somewhat from the rougher side of University life; while he would also enjoy every possible facility for study. His first years at Cambridge were spent under the invaluable influence of William de Melton, Fellow of Michaelhouse; in him John found at once a faithful friend and a compatriot, for Melton was a Yorkshireman, and there is a possibility that he was a friend of Fisher's parents. He gained a great reputation as philosopher, theologian, and preacher, and ultimately became Master of his college and Chancellor of York. His promising young pupil's devout affection for him is evident from a passage in one of his controversial books:

"My master, William de Melton, Chancellor of York, a man eminent both for holiness and for every kind of erudition, used often to admonish me when I was a boy and attended his lectures on Euclid, that if I looked on the least letter of any geometrical figure as superfluous, I had not seized

the true and full meaning of Euclid. But if the disciple of Euclid must be so careful in points of geometry, certainly the disciple of Christ must weigh well each word of his divine Master, and be thoroughly convinced that there is not a word without its purpose."

Here, again, we see that strong habit of faithfulness in little things which characterised the future martyr from his earliest years to his heroic death; and in this, no doubt, lay the secret of his success in study.

The ascetic ideal of the training and its Spartan discipline probably agreed well with the sturdy, devout north-country lad; for his was no easy path. Accustomed to study from his childhood, he would enter his college well grounded in Latin, grammar, and logic—the beloved logic of that period—and so he began the arts course. Historians enable us to form a fairly clear idea of the life which John Fisher led for the next few years. It must be remembered that the age of admission was early enough to necessitate schoolboy discipline.

"The 'boys,' as they were termed, were never permitted to go beyond the college gates unless accompanied by a Master of Arts. They were distributed through the

college in threes and fours as joint occupants of a single room which served both as dormitory and study: if convicted of any infringement of the college rules they were soundly birched in the hall or court."[1]

When the youthful scholars attained the status of B.A., "they entered upon a stage more nearly corresponding to that of the modern undergraduate. The Bachelor would be permitted to occupy a room jointly with a senior Fellow. . . . The room, scantily furnished, would always be comfortless, and in winter often scarcely tenable. There was no fireplace and no stove, this luxury being reserved for the hall alone. The wind whistled shrewdly through the crevices of the ill-made casement, and the dim flame of the oil-lamp flickered fitfully as the student kept his vigils, intent upon some greasy parchment page over which amanuensis and reader had alike laboured with painful toil. The volume over which he pored was probably from the college library, and it was one of the most envied privileges of the collegian that he had access to such aids as these."

All the members of the college were entitled to use the library, but only Fellows enjoyed the privilege of taking books to

[1] Mullinger, *History of Cambridge University.*

their own rooms. This learned historian pictures the average college library of those days as "a long, dark, damp room little better than a hayloft, reached by a staircase composed of blocks of timber placed one above the other, with rows of rudely constructed bookstands, where the volumes lay chained, and where the young scholar might commence his acquaintance with Bonaventura or Aquinas." But in such treasures, no doubt, the earnest student found rich reward for all his trials.

The day would begin with early Mass in the neighbouring church of St Michael. One writer has justly observed that "religious observances are not so much insisted on in college statutes as mentioned as part of the common life, not less essential than the common meal."

After breakfast (another luxury reserved for the wealthier few) exercises and lectures occupied the student until about half-past nine. About ten, he dined. Meals were always taken in common, in hall. Meat was provided twice a day, except in Lent. At Michaelhouse each scholar found the necessaries for a week in turn, the Master's stipend and allowance being the same as that of the scholars. The sum allotted for

the maintenance of a Fellow never exceeded 16s. to 18s. a week in modern money, sometimes it was much less. 'Hard living and high thinking' was the rule throughout the college. At Oxford, the standard of living was, at that time, far more luxurious, yet Blessed Thomas More, discussing his fallen fortunes with his family, remarked:

"But my counsel is that we fall not to the lowest fare first; we will not therefore descend to Oxford fare."

In hall and college generally, Latin conversation was obligatory, as elsewhere.

After a short rest, work began again, for the next two hours. If the scholar could avoid the afternoon 'acts,' a species of Latin debate, his time was his own until supper, about five o'clock. In the evening he could take his walk or amuse himself by the fire in hall. Some slight refreshments may have preceded the evening service, after which he went to bed.

This routine was varied by festival days, entrance feasts to welcome a new member, or funeral feasts in honour of bygone benefactors. Michaelhouse appears to have gained a considerable reputation for amateur theatricals, given at the greater festival seasons; most of the students stayed

up for the Christmas and Easter vacations. Other favourite forms of recreation were riding, tennis, the crossbow, cock-fighting, and fishing. This last caused bitter feuds with the townsmen, who never succeeded in convincing the University of the corporation's real right to the river. Consequently, generations of students indulged in the joys of poaching in broad daylight—and sometimes stoning the rival claimants!

The daily walk, with a single companion, was not merely a matter of choice, but the outcome of a college statute enjoining "the Fellows who are willing to walk out" to "seek each other's society and walk together, conversing together in pairs on scholarship or on some proper and pleasant topic." This is said to have been based upon the example of the Apostles.

The prospect which grew familiar to John Fisher in his rambles was vastly different from the Cambridge of our own day. Colleges were few; the old churches we know were there, and one that we do not—the beautiful building near Michaelhouse belonging to the Franciscans, but pulled down to make way for Trinity. Narrow, reeking lanes honeycombed the town; one called University Street led to the common schools,

where the Senate House now stands. There were plenty of open spaces. The hostel named God's House, on the site of Christ's College, had a rear view over acres of corn land. The splendid, unfinished chapel of King's rose from a grassy plain, with only a few private houses fronting the street. Great St Mary's was rebuilding—a forty years' task begun in 1479. Between the river, Michaelhouse, and the neglected Hospital of St John, orchards and cornfields stretched. The Trumpington Road threaded dreary marshes, and beyond the river by the 'backs,' there were no houses nearer than Newnham. The fearsome floods which often inundated the town in winter were recalled to mind by the King's Ditch, a considerable stream meandering from the Cam near St Catherine's Hall, past Petty Cury and Trinity Church, through the grounds of the Franciscans (now Sidney Sussex College), under Jesus Lane, and then across the common. In those days there was a little island behind Trinity Hall known as Garret's Hostel Green.

Such were the scenes in which John Fisher's new life was laid. Now let us try to get some idea of the studies which engrossed the best years of his youth.

The first years of the Arts course would be devoted to more grammar and logic; in his fourth year he would attend lectures on the philosophical writings of Aristotle; the fifth year was devoted to arithmetic and music—here, again, his north-country training would surely stand him in good stead; the sixth year comprised geometry and perspective; the seventh, astronomy.

The various stages of the 'artists' course were sharply defined. As a 'Sophister' the youthful student took part in the public disputes in the schools; at the end of his fourth year, the Masters of Arts appointed by the University made inquiries concerning his age, academic standing, and character. If he survived this test a public examination followed in the Arts schools, somewhat similar to the present final examination for degree or honours; he emerged from this a 'Questioner.' This was always a pre-Lenten ceremony, and Ash Wednesday saw the Questioner a fledgling B.A.

John Fisher reached this stage in 1487, at the age of eighteen. From taking part in the disputations he would now be called upon to preside over them as a 'Determiner' throughout Lent. The Determiner desired a large audience: he invited all his

friends, who came bringing with them all their friends; some zealous souls posted themselves at the doors to seize the passers-by and drag them in to swell the crowd. Fisher's abilities could now be seen to advantage, and that the authorities were not slow to appreciate the worth of this brilliant boy is proved by his rapid rise in the University world.

A final ordeal awaited the young Bachelor when he 'commenced' M.A. This usually took place on July 2, the day of the 'Great Commencement,' the red letter of the academical year, in Great St Mary's. The University assembled at seven o'clock in the morning, and began the proceedings by going to Mass, the church filling with dignitaries, students, and onlookers of every description. Afterwards the academical ceremony began.

The 'incepting Master,' as the candidate was called, went to his appointed place on the epistle side of the church, with the 'regent' M.A. (of something over a year's standing), who acted as his 'father.' There the 'father' placed on the inceptor's head the cap, the sign of magisterial dignity. Then the new Master read aloud a passage from Aristotle; from this he had already

chosen two 'affirmations of questions' which he had now to defend in logical dispute against all comers. He was thereupon attacked by the youngest 'regent,' his senior by a year, who might also make a 'prefatory oration' in which he enjoyed (vastly, no doubt) the privilege of satirising the notabilities and leading events of the previous academical year.

"Sufficit," announces the proctor, and a second opponent, the youngest non-regent, comes forward to carry on the attack. When he has done, his place is taken by a third, the youngest Doctor of Divinity, who sums up. A few further formalities, then the bedell salutes the flushed and happy victor for the first time as "Noster Magister, Joannes Fisher."

And so, at the age of twenty-two, after eight years' strenuous study, John ascends the second step of the academical ladder in the year 1491. Feasts, rejoicings, and present-giving mark the great day, ending with a banquet for the authorities and the new Master's personal friends. His own college now bestowed her first honour on the son whose career shed such lustre upon her; during the same year Fisher was elected Fellow of Michaelhouse.

For another year he is liable to give lectures in the Arts schools, while he is 'regent' M.A. At the end of that time he is qualified to teach in any University of Europe, and if he continues to reside, becomes 'non-regent.'

But John Fisher's ambition reached far beyond this. He was wholly devoted to his great ideal, the priesthood. Though it is difficult to ascertain the exact date of his ordination, his biographer says "he must have been ordained priest on the title of his Fellowship."

However that may be, no sooner had he completed the Arts course than he set out upon the longer and more strenuous path of theological studies—the Divinity course. During the next ten years his days were filled with hard work; hours of close study and attendance at lectures, while he himself gave lectures also; and all the while his reputation, both for worth and for learning, was growing steadily. In 1494 he was chosen Senior Proctor—an important event in his life, for it was in the course of his proctorial duties that he went to Court, and there met his illustrious friend, the Lady Margaret Beaufort, the King's mother, of whom we shall hear more later. This

momentous event in the history of the University is commemorated by a note of his expenses entered in the Proctor's Book in his own hand in Latin :

"For the hire of two horses for 11 days, 7 shillings; for breakfast before passing to Greenwich, 3 pence; boat-hire, 4 pence. I dined with the lady, mother of the King. I supped with the Chancellor," etc.

Honours fell thick upon the brilliant young priest now. In 1497, only fourteen years after he had entered the University, John Fisher was elected Master of his college, in succession to his own old tutor, William de Melton, at the early age of twenty-eight. Though always the humblest and most selfless of men, this first link binding him to the beloved University which had taught him so much must have been a great happiness to him.

Four years yet remained of the Divinity course, years of lectures and study, which gave excellent opportunities of testing the candidate's abilities. Six severe conditions were laid down for admission to the degree; and as Mullinger, the famous historian of Cambridge, sums up: "It is evident that if the statutory course was strictly observed, the Doctors of those days could have been

no smatterers. The scarlet hood never graced the shoulders of one who was nothing more than a dexterous logician, nor was the honoured title of Doctor ever conferred on one who had never discharged the function of teacher."

John Fisher received his doctorate on July 5, 1501, at the age of thirty-two, after eighteen years' residence at the University; ten days later his honours were crowned with the Vice-Chancellorship of the University.

Such was his mental equipment for the priestly life. Of his spiritual preparation for it we can gather some idea from his own description of his exalted ideal of the priesthood:

"The Holy Ghost in the Psalms compares the Apostles and other ministers of God to the heavens, the people to the earth. 'The heavens show forth the glory of God.' Like heavenly bodies the ministers of God illuminate by the splendour of their lives, warm by the ardour of their charity, moisten by their counsels, vivify by their promises, thunder by their threats, flash by their miracles. This was so not only in the days of the Apostles; the Church is ever one and the same, and now stands in need of these ministries no less than then."

CHAPTER III

LADY MARGARET AND THE UNIVERSITY

WHEN John Fisher became Vice-Chancellor of his University the general state of affairs, both there and elsewhere, was extremely discouraging. The whole land was suffering from the despondent unrest and demoralisation following on the long civil strife—what we know all too well as post-war conditions.

The fall of Constantinople about the time of John Fisher's birth seemed to endanger the very existence of Christianity; and the spectre of this terror in the East was to haunt him through life. Church, State, and the world of learning were alike affected by the prevailing dejection; yet in each hopeful signs were not wanting for those who could read them.

Father Bridgett makes the striking suggestion that John Fisher's earnest prayer for apostolic men may have been instrumental in the raising up of two great saints who, unknown to him on earth, were then beginning the lives that were to shine with such lustre on the whole world—St Ignatius Loyola, a

fourteen-year-old page at the Court of Spain when that prayer was made, and St Francis Xavier, born two years later.

Fisher was a young student when the discovery of the New World by Columbus thrilled the Old. There is a possibility that the brilliant young Master of Michaelhouse may have met Sebastian Cabot, discoverer of Newfoundland, when he came to England in 1497. Henry VII's privy purse expenses for April 8, 1504, include an entry of £2 given to "a priest that goeth to the new island"; and as Fisher's connection with the Court was then well established, he may have met that very missionary.

Early in his Cambridge career he would have heard of the great library bequeathed to Oxford by Duke Humphrey, and of Bishop Gray's valuable collection left to Balliol. But the interest of these benefactions would be eclipsed by the intense curiosity and profound admiration which Italian scholarship was beginning to arouse in England, with its rich promise of additions to learning and literature.

Yet the tidings of this new learning evoked grave distrust, for the cities in which it flourished were growing notoriously evil. The youthful Savonarola, when he fled to

the Dominicans at Bologna, wrote to his father that he could no longer endure 'the enormous wickedness' of his countrymen—whom even Machiavelli himself declared to exceed all other nations in irreligion and depravity. Also, the conservatives clung tenaciously to the old traditional learning, some opposed to change in itself, and all fearing the innovations of the humanists as threatening the system to which they had devoted their best years, and on which their academic reputation rested.

Men of worth and learning were not wanting among John Fisher's contemporaries at Cambridge—that noble benefactor Rotherham; John Argentine, Provost of King's and physician to Henry VII's two sons; and others. It has been said that Cambridge had never been better able to sustain a comparison with Oxford; and of the twenty sees into which England and Wales were then divided, nine were filled by Cambridge men. Yet the general conditions were such that Fisher, looking back on that time in after years, described it in these words:

"Somehow, I know not how, whether it were the continual strifes with the townsmen and the wrongs they did us, or the long abiding of the fever, that tried us with a

cruelty above the ordinary, carrying off many of our learned men, or that there were few or no helpers and patrons of letters —whatever were the true cause, doubtless there had stolen over wellnigh all of us a weariness of learning and study, so that not a few did take counsel in their own minds how that they might effect their departure so as it were not to their own hurt."

How little did the devout, scholarly young Vice-Chancellor dream that he himself was to be the means of renewing the starved life of the University! Michaelhouse prospered under his rule; soon after he succeeded his old tutor in the Mastership the college stood sixth in the list according to revenue. He himself had enriched it, in 1497, with a gift of £110 towards a new building; but his influence was now to extend to the whole University. His reputation, both for deep learning and for austere holiness of life, was growing steadily; we have seen that it had already come to the knowledge of the King's mother.

Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond, is thus described by Baker, historian of St John's College: "I need say nothing of so great a name: she was daughter of John Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, grandson

of John of Gaunt, and so descended from Edward the Third; consort of Edmund Tudor, Earl of Richmond, son of Catherine of France, and so allied to the crown of France; and mother of Henry VII, King of England, from whom all our kings of England, as from his elder daughter Margaret, who bore her name, all the kings of Scotland, are ever since descended. And though she herself was never a queen, yet her son, if he had any lineal title to the crown, as he derived it from her, so at her death she had thirty kings and queens allied to her within the fourth degree either of blood or affinity, and since her death she has been allied in her posterity to thirty more." A contemporary poet lauded her as "mother, author, plotter, and counsellor of union"; that union of her son, Henry, Earl of Richmond, with Elizabeth of York which ended the long rivalry of York and Lancaster.

But all this was only the foundation of her true greatness. This noble lady was pre-eminent among the Englishwomen of her day, both in learning and in holiness of life—the very qualities on which John Fisher's fame rested. She had a deep devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to our Lady. It was her custom to hear several

Masses daily, to recite the Divine Office and that of the Blessed Virgin. She added practical good works to her devotions, providing for the education of numerous young men at her own cost, in her own establishment, and using her great influence wisely for their ecclesiastical preferment. To her we owe the translation into English of the Fourth Book of the *Imitation of Christ* and other spiritual books.

In 1502, Lady Margaret appointed Dr. Fisher her confessor and chaplain (in place of Richard Fitzjames, promoted, curiously enough, to the See of Rochester, and afterwards to those of Chichester and London). About this time he resigned the Mastership of Michaelhouse.

In John Fisher this holy lady immediately saw a priest after her own heart; from the first those two great souls recognised and understood one another, and the noble friendship which grew up between them conferred lasting riches on the world. Though Lady Margaret was old enough to have been his mother, she obeyed her saintly guide with child-like simplicity, while, at the same time, she lavished such a motherly care and affection upon him that he afterwards declared to the students of

St John's that "he was indebted to her as to his own mother." After all those strenuous years of hard study her gentle, inspiring influence must have brought welcome sunshine into his life; sympathising as she did with the ideals he pondered long and earnestly, and which she, who "made it the whole business of her life to do good," enabled him to realise for the benefit of souls. Fisher's warm heart cherished an enduring gratitude, and many years later he writes to his friend, Nicholas West, Bishop of Ely: ". . . though she chose me as her director, to hear her confessions and to guide her life, yet I gladly confess that I learnt more from her great virtue than ever I could teach to her." So great was the mutual reverence and affection between these two holy souls—a spiritual relation of such unique beauty that it can be found nowhere else save in the Catholic Church, founded as it is in her great sacrament of penance.

The first effect of this noble friendship benefited Oxford as well as Cambridge. Lady Margaret devoted her time and also her splendid fortune to good works, and in 1503, on our Lady's birthday, she endowed in both Universities a Readership in

Divinity. The practical wisdom of the regulations laid down was admirably calculated to insure their conscientious fulfilment. The payment of the salary was entrusted to the abbot and monks of Westminster, whom the Countess had lavishly enriched, and the salary itself was a sufficiently generous one to attract the best talent in the University. The instruction was to be given quite gratuitously in the Divinity Schools "to everyone thither resorting. . . . Such works in divinity as the Chancellor or Vice-Chancellor, with the 'college of doctors' should judge necessary" must be read by the appointed Reader for one hour daily—from seven till eight every morning—throughout each term and during the Long Vacation up till September 8. But in Lent, if the Chancellor thought fit, this reading might be suspended in order that Reader and class might devote themselves to preaching instead.

Careful provision was made for possible absence; not only must the Reader obtain a licence limited to fourteen days, but in the meantime he had to find an adequate deputy—and pay him himself! The election was made biennially, on the day preceding the Long Vacation; and the

Chancellor, or Vice-Chancellor, and all the doctors, bachelors, and inceptors in divinity, both secular and regular, must swear comprehensively to "choose the most worthy, without favour, partiality, reward, fear, or sinister affection."

It is not surprising that the first Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity chosen by the University was John Fisher; a happy choice, which must have given pleasure to the foundress, who well knew how fully her ideal would be realised by him. Dr. Fisher's tenure of office was short, however, as the regulations required that the Reader must resign if elected either Chancellor or Vice-Chancellor. He therefore resigned in 1503.

Lady Margaret's second benefaction to Cambridge, under Fisher's influence, struck at the root of the evil which largely prepared the way for the 'Reformation.' The Margaret Preachership, founded in 1504, was designed to revive the neglected art of preaching. The theological instruction gratuitously provided by the Readership was to be given practical effect in sermons to the ill-instructed laity. Times had changed much since Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln, tersely observed that "Yf any prieste saye he cannot preache, one remedye

is to resign he uppe his benefice." By the end of the fifteenth century the danger of Lollardry had necessitated such precautions as the licensing of all secular preachers; and sermons had become so rare, both at the Universities and throughout the country, that directions were issued requiring the provincial clergy to preach to their flocks once a quarter! Even then no penalties seem to have been provided for the neglect of this rule.

"Rare as was the sermon," says Mullinger, "the theologian in the form of a modest, reverent expounder of scripture was yet rarer. Bewildered audiences were called upon to admire the performances of intellectual acrobats."

Dr. Fisher and Lady Margaret contrived a practical means of helping the people thus left uninstructed. Erasmus testifies that, besides the widely urged revival of preaching, Fisher's aim was to simplify and elevate the prevailing style. "To abolish the customary cavillings about words and parade of sophistry, and to have those who were designed for preachers exercised in sound learning and sober disputations that they might preach the Word of God gravely and with an evangelical spirit, and recom-

mend it to the minds of the learned by an efficacious eloquence."

The Lady Margaret Preacher was to be an unbeneficed resident in the University, either Doctor or Bachelor of Divinity, and perpetual Fellow of some college there. He was to preach six sermons annually "to the praise and honour of the Holy Name of Jesus and the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary," preaching once in every two years as follows: On some Sunday at St Paul's Cross, or St Margaret's, Westminster, or another notable London church; on some feast day at the churches of Ware and Cheshunt in Hertfordshire, Bassingbourne, Orwell, and Babraham in Cambridgeshire, Maxey, St James Deeping, St John Deeping, Bourne, Boston, and Swineshead in Lincolnshire.

The triennial election of the preacher was entrusted to the Vice-Chancellor (who had the casting vote) and the heads of the colleges; and the salary was to be paid by the abbot and monks of Westminster. It seems probable that this was the only sermon preached in English at the University. Both Preacher and Reader were bound to pray at stated times for the Countess and her relatives.

In this same year—1504—John Fisher was elected Chancellor, an office which he was destined to fill for the rest of his life. Honours continued to fall thick and fast upon him, both from Court and from University; but he remained unalterably faithful to his high ideal, using his increasing influence, as he used his deep learning, for the good of souls. It was precisely this holiness of life and distinterested zeal that obtained the highest honour for him.

In 1504, Lady Margaret received a letter from her royal son which must have given her as much pleasure as surprise; and it must have astonished Dr. Fisher as much as anyone.

"MADAM,

"An I thought I should not offend you, which I will never do wilfully, I am well minded to promote Master Fisher, your confessor, to a bishopric; and I assure you, Madam, for none other cause, but for the great and singular virtue, that I know and see in him, as well in cunning [*i.e.*, talent] and natural wisdom, and specially for his good and virtuous living and conversation. And by the promotion of such a man I know well it should encourage

many others to live virtuously and to take such ways as he doth, which should be a good example to many others hereafter. Howbeit, without your pleasure known I will not move him nor tempt him therein. And therefore I beseech you that I may know your mind and your pleasure in that behalf, which shall be followed as much as God will give me grace. I have in my days promoted many a man unadvisedly, and I would now make some recompense to promote some good and virtuous men, which I doubt not should best please God, who ever preserve you in good health and long life."

Thus not only was John Fisher's bishopric due solely to his own glorious example, but that same cause moved the King to make a solemn resolution to repair a crying evil which was largely responsible for the abuses of the time—the misuse of the royal prerogative of nominating bishops. Too often unsuitable and worthless men, mere courtiers, were thus rewarded with episcopal revenues; and it was this which Henry VII was now resolved to amend. That he acted entirely on his own initiative is proved by Fisher's own words,

some years later, to Bishop Fox of Winchester:

"Ever since our first acquaintance, your lordship had taken so affectionate an interest in me, that I felt myself impelled most ardently both to learning and to virtue. You also recommended me to King Henry VII, who then, with the greatest prudence, held the reins of this kingdom, so that by the esteem he had for me from your frequent commendations, and of his own mere motion, without any obsequiousness on my part, without the intercession of any (as he more than once declared to myself), he gave me the bishopric of Rochester, of which I am now the unworthy occupant. There are, perhaps, many who believe that his mother, the Countess of Richmond and Derby, that noble and incomparable lady, dear to me by so many titles, obtained the bishopric for me by her prayers to her son. But the facts are entirely different, as your lordship knows well, who was the King's most intimate counsellor, as you were also of the illustrious King Henry VIII, who now by most just right of succession fills his father's throne, as long as your health allowed you to frequent the Court. I do not say this to diminish my debt of gratitude to that excel-

lent lady. My debts were indeed great. Were there no other besides the great and sincere love which she bore to me above others (as I know for a certainty), yet what favour could equal such a love on the part of such a princess? But besides her love she was most munificent towards me."

There is something extraordinarily simple and endearing about the humble pride which John Fisher's affectionate heart took in the devotion of his friends. His enduring gratitude never forgot those who had helped him in his youth, and there can be no doubt that he richly repaid them by his powerful prayers.

So, at the age of thirty-five, the distinguished young Chancellor was persuaded by Bishop Fox and Lady Margaret to accept, not the honour, but the "good work" of a bishop. It is interesting, at this point, to glance at the minute portrait his early biographer, Dr. Hall, draws of him.

"In stature of body he was tall and comely, exceeding the common and middle sort of men, for he was to the quantity of six feet in height, and being therewith very slender and lean, was nevertheless upright and well-formed, straight-backed, big-

jointed, and strongly sinewed. His hair by nature black, though in his later time, through age and imprisonment, turned to hoariness, or rather to whiteness. His eyes long and round, neither full black nor full grey, but of a mixed colour between both. His forehead smooth and large; his nose of a good and even proportion; somewhat wide-mouthed and big-jawed, as one ordained to utter speech much, wherein was, notwithstanding, a certain comeliness; his skin somewhat tawny, mixed with many blue veins. His face, hands, and all his body so bare of flesh, as is almost incredible, which came the rather (as may be thought) by the great abstinence and penance he used upon himself many years together, even from his youth. In his countenance he bore such a reverent gravity, and therewith in his doings exercised such discreet severity, that not only of his equals, but even of his superiors, he was both honoured and feared.

"In speech he was very mild, temperate, and modest, saving in matters of God and his charge, (and in the affairs) which then began to trouble the world, and therein he would be earnest above his accustomed order. But vainly or without cause he would

never speak; neither was his ordinary talk of common worldly matters, but rather of the divinity and higher power of God, of the joys of heaven and the pains of hell, of the glorious death of martyrs and strait life of confessors, with suchlike virtuous and profitable talk, which he always uttered with such a heavenly grace that his words were always a great edifying in his hearers."

We are fortunate in possessing two sketches of John Fisher from Holbein's master hand. They depict him at the age of fifty-eight, and have been ably described by Dr. Woltmann: "The worn countenance, with its honest, modest, but anxiously conscientious expression, shows completely the man, whose wonderful purity of life, combined with profound and unostentatious learning, as well as incredible kindliness of demeanour towards high and low, is extolled by Erasmus."

CHAPTER IV

BISHOP AND COLLEGE FOUNDER

THE See of Rochester thus committed to John Fisher's care was the second oldest in England, having been established by St Augustine, while the first cathedral there was founded by Ethelbert, our first Christian king, and dedicated to St Andrew, from whose monastery on the Cœlian Hill the Benedictine monks had just brought the Faith to England. St Augustine himself consecrated one of his little band, Justus, the first bishop, in 604. In the centuries that followed the cathedral suffered much from fire and from the invading Danes; but early in the twelfth century, Gundulf, monk of Bec, and his friend, the great Lanfranc, rebuilt the ruinous cathedral and replaced the five secular canons with twenty-two Benedictine monks. About the same time, Gundulf began the strong castle of Rochester, the remains of which survive to-day; he also obtained certain revenues, giving the larger share to the monks.

Rochester was known as the poorest see

in England, and the smallest, with its ninety-nine West Kent parishes, and its unique relation to the archdiocese of Canterbury. Again and again cathedral and buildings suffered from fire and pillage, for its important position on the Medway has exposed Rochester to the dangers of every political disturbance from Roman days. The monastery attached to the cathedral seems always to have been comparatively poor; and friction frequently occurred between the Bishop and the monks. But one of the most auspicious events in the history of the see took place in 1201.

In that year a certain devout Scot from Perth, by name William, and by trade a baker, set out on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He began his journey by making for the famous shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury, and this brought him to Rochester, one of the stages on the pilgrim route from London.

Now William's youth had been somewhat hectic, but when he grew to manhood he 'devoted himself wholly to the service of God' in the eminently practical manner of his countrymen. He began each day by going to Mass, then he followed his trade, and gave every tenth loaf he baked to the

poor. One day, when he arrived at the church very early in the morning, before the sun was yet risen, this good man found a deserted child abandoned on the threshold. His warm heart went out to the helpless little boy, and he adopted it as his own, christening it 'David the Foundling,' and taught him his own trade.

Some years later, William, having made a vow to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Places, received the consecrated wallet and staff, and setting forth with his boy David, crossed the Border. They spent three days in Rochester, but instead of taking the Canterbury road, David—the devil having entered into his heart—misled his good foster-father in order to rob him; at the spot afterwards known as "Palmersdene" he felled the unsuspecting man with a blow on the head, and then cut his throat.

The first person who discovered the body was a poor wandering madwoman, who twined a wreath of flowers and crowned the dead man. Then she took off the garland and put it on her own head. Instantly she was cured, and became sane again. The monks of Rochester, hearing the news, buried the body in the cathedral, and a subsequent bishop obtained the canonisa-

tion of St William. His shrine attracted flocks of pilgrims, and Rochester's martyr-bishop must often have prayed there. The city showed a marked predeliction for Northern saints—St Andrew, Scotland's patron, to name the cathedral; St William of Perth to be honoured therein; and Blessed John Fisher, from Yorkshire, to glorify its name throughout the Church as bishop and martyr.

The episcopal register records the consecration of "The Reverend Father in Christ, my Lord John Fisher, doctor in theology, and by the grace of God Bishop of Rochester," appointed by Pope Julius in the first year of his pontificate. He was consecrated by William Warham, "Archbishop of Canterbury, Primate of all England and legate of the Apostolic See, in his chapel within his manor of Lambeth . . . on Sunday before the feast of St Catherine, virgin"—that was, November 24, 1504—"in the presence of Master Hugh Ashton and Richard Collet, doctor of laws." The assistant bishops, William Smith of Lincoln and Richard Nykke of Norwich, consecrated William Barons for the See of London at the same time.

Bishop Fisher was enthroned in his cathe-

dral by proxy, in the person of his Vicar-General, Dr. Thomas Head, on April 24, 1505. He chose two men after his own heart to help him in the administration of his diocese; Nicholas Metcalf, his Archdeacon for twenty-four years, and Dr. John Adison, his chaplain.

His promotion to the episcopate did not sever John Fisher's connection with Cambridge. Though he devoted himself wholeheartedly to his see, his duties as Chancellor could still be performed by deputy; for the affairs of the diocese, and the frequent necessity of attendance at Court, made it desirable that his headquarters should be at Rochester. He used his extended influence to enrich the University, in collaboration with the munificent Lady Margaret; and we may leave for a moment the consideration of his long episcopate to study his work as co-founder of two famous colleges.

Their mutual devotion to true learning formed a strong bond of sympathy between these two great minds; and it was natural that Bishop Fisher should interest his friend in the languishing University under his care. Lady Margaret had intended to add to her princely gifts to Westminster Abbey

by increasing its endowment; but her confessor—much as he loved the monastic state—justly pointed out that Westminster already ranked as the wealthiest house in England: whereas "the schools of learning were meanly endowed, the provisions for scholars very few and small, and colleges yet wanting to their maintenance—that by such foundations she might have two ends and designs at once—might double her charity and double her reward, by affording as well supports to learning as encouragements to virtue."

For it must not be forgotten that by far the greater number of colleges in the University were designed for the study of theology—that is to say, for the adequate training of the secular clergy. It is to the Catholic Church that we owe our great Universities, and medieval Cambridge was, to a large extent, a training centre for the priesthood. That was why holy, thinking men and women like these noble founders had the welfare of the students and all that concerned them so deeply at heart. In all his enormous labours on behalf of the University, continued into his old age, John Fisher's great aim was, in his own beautiful phrase, to multiply 'golden priests.' It was

for this that he spent himself in tireless devotion to dreary details of business, thankless intricacies of diplomacy, the encouragement of noble benefactors, the heart-breaking delays of long, wearisome litigation. And it was because of her splendid devotion to Christ in his priesthood that Lady Margaret lavished her wealth and her influence upon the realisation of the wise and saintly Chancellor's plans for reforming the starved University. Thus the two great colleges, Christ's and St John's, came into being.

Whatever be the truth of the tradition that Fisher's first days at Cambridge were spent at the hostel known as "God's House," it is a fact that he persuaded Lady Margaret to refound this obscure school for grammar. It had been founded in 1439 by William Bingham, a London parish priest, continued by 'Holy Henry' VI, but left incomplete owing to that King's absorption in his own great college—King's. Lady Margaret now decided to enlarge this humble foundation, endowing it generously as "Christ's College" (out of her 'singular devotion to the name of Jesus Christ'), for the study of grammar, arts, and theology, thus developing and realising the plans of

her beloved kinsman, Henry VI. Her son gave the necessary royal consent in an affectionate letter, and the Countess accordingly obtained the licence for her foundation on May 1, 1505.

It became almost necessary that Bishop Fisher should be there to supervise the establishment of the new college, and about this time he was elected President of Queens', an arrangement which provided him with suitable quarters in Cambridge.

Queens' was another of what may be called the ecclesiastical colleges of the University. Founded in 1448 by Marguerite d'Anjou, the tragic Red Rose queen, its statutes were given by her successor, Elizabeth de Woodville, formerly one of her ladies; it was intended for the study of theology, though canon and civil law were permitted also.

For the next three years John Fisher fostered the growth of the new foundation, while at the same time he presided over the welfare of Queens' so admirably that when he resigned in 1508 the Fellows were unanimous in their lamentations and wished he had "as great a desire to be their president as they of continuing him." They declared that, without flattery, he was "very

dear to them all, not only on account of his ingenious humanity, but for his excellent learning and prudence."

With the superbly princely generosity that marked all her gifts to the University, Lady Margaret, having refounded and endowed Christ's, provided in her will that the buildings should be 'perfectly finished and garnished'; adding a bequest of lands, a sum of £100 to be deposited in the college coffers, and a share of her plate, jewels, vestments, and church furnishings. Further, she left directions for the manor house of Malton to be made habitable "so that the maister and scolers may resort thidder, and there to tarry in tyme of contagiouse siknes at Cambrige, and exercise their lernyng and studies."

The statutes given by Lady Margaret to her college in 1506 evidently embody her wise and experienced adviser's considered ideals of college discipline. Several innovations distinguish them; the usual wide liberty of the Master is limited, to safeguard the interests of the society, and residence is enforced for at least two out of every three months, unless in exceptional circumstances: and a "true and faithful" statement of accounts is required twice

yearly. The twelve Fellows are to be priests, and at least half, but not more than nine, were to be north-countrymen—a pleasant little revelation of the natural sympathies of the founders, who knew the worth of sturdy north-country Catholics in lax times. The scholars must be students of promise, and of good character, 'able to speak and understand the Latin tongue, and intending to devote themselves to literature and theology and the sacred profession.' The same amount of preference was to be given to boys from the north; and a new departure is made in the provision for 'pensioners.'

A noticeable innovation is the appointment of a college lecturer, one of whose four daily lectures in hall is to be devoted to the works of the poets and orators. The usual disputations, exercises, problems in logic, philosophy, and so forth, filled the students' strenuous day. An important item in John Fisher's system, based on his own experience and observation, was the regulation of the food allowance. This he limited to twelve pence a day, as at Michaelhouse; thus employing a safeguard against the insidious dangers of luxury, especially that of the table. This frugality he not only

prescribed for St John's later on, but maintained it, despite a general rise in prices.

Lady Margaret visited the University during 1505, and was met by the authorities three miles out; but we have no detail of the event beyond Fuller's statement that the Countess came to see Christ's while the building was in progress, and glancing out of a window, "saw the dean call a faulty scholar to correction." He must have been somewhat taken aback when she called to him from the window, "Lente, Lente!" (Gently, Gently).

Cambridge was honoured by another royal visit when Lady Margaret returned with her son, Henry VII, who was on pilgrimage to Our Lady of Walsingham, with a distinguished following. Again the illustrious visitors were met by the civic dignitaries beyond the town, the whole party halting a quarter of a mile out. There the four Orders of mendicant friars were drawn up, with the other religious Orders, followed by the members of the University according to their degree.

The King passed slowly along their ranks, stooping from his saddle to kiss the cross borne by the representative of

each order in turn, until he reached the University cross, erected above a bench and cushion.

Here the Bishop-Chancellor, with the other doctors, welcomed the King as he dismounted. That remarkable little group must have formed a very striking picture—the distinguished figure of the King; the tall, comely, ascetic Chancellor; that *grande dame,* the Lady Margaret; the handsome young Prince Henry, who was to send the holy prelate to a martyr's death. There is a possibility that the famous Erasmus was there too; Cambridge had conferred her degrees of Bachelor and Doctor of Divinity upon him about that time.

Bishop Fisher declaimed a short Latin oration, which has come down to us intact; its courtly phrases came from his heart, for he sincerely esteemed the King as a lover of piety and learning, and the King revered him for these same qualities. Concluding his praises with a fervent expression of gratitude for the royal favour at a time when "We should indeed have fallen into utter desolation had not your majesty, like the orient from on high, looked down upon us," the orator made a touchingly warm acknowledgement of his

own personal indebtedness to the King, ending with a devout prayer for length of days, undisputed succession, and every temporal and spiritual blessing for the monarch and his son.

Then the King mounted his horse, the procession reformed, and made a slow circuit of the town, passing the Dominicans' house (where Emmanuel now stands), and so to the President's Lodge at Queens', where the King had been entertained on a former visit in 1497. Here the royal guests rested for an hour.

Then the King rose and "did on his gown" and the blue mantle of the Order of the Garter—as did all the knights of that noble order in his train—and rode in solemn state to the half-built chapel of King's. The beautiful building was not then roofed, and lacked most of the rich details of its architecture, owing to lack of funds and the devastation caused by the civil wars. But a brave show was made with the escutcheons of the knights, and a brilliant gathering filled the chapel when the holy Chancellor came to pontificate at solemn Vespers. Such ceremonies must have reminded him of the old days in Beverley Minster, and doubtless the rites

would be very perfectly performed under his experienced care.

This visit to the University evidently made a lasting impression on the King's mind, for he afterwards made a noble bequest for the 'perfect finishing' of the splendid chapel begun by his ancestor. Henry VII died on April 21, 1509, and Bishop Fisher was chosen to preach the funeral sermon of the last English king to die in the Faith for many long years. The preacher testified in no uncertain terms to his royal benefactor's lively faith "in God, in his Church, and in the sacraments thereof, which he received all with marvellous devotion. . . . That same day of his departing, he heard Mass of the glorious Virgin, the Mother of Christ, to whom always in his life he had singular and special devotion. The image of the crucifix many a time that day full devoutly he did behold with great reverence. . . . Who may think that in this man there was not perfect faith?"

Two months later, Lady Margaret died, on the Feast of SS Peter and Paul, June 29. With the loss of his great friend the happiest half of John Fisher's life came to an end; henceforth his days were to be

filled with cares and troubles of all kinds. Widespread mourning testified to the love and esteem in which the great lady was held; for in the midst of all its troubles, Tudor England honoured sanctity and valued true worth. The most distinguished men of the day combined to honour her memory. "Erasmus composed her epitaph, Skelton sang her elegy, and Torrigiano, the Florentine sculptor, immortalised her features in what has been characterised as 'the most beautiful and venerable figure that the abbey contains.'"[1] And her saintly confessor preached her panegyric to a crowded congregation in old St Paul's.

That must indeed have been a marvellous sermon to hear—the sorrowing survivor of one of the noblest friendships the world has seen, describing, with all his heart in his voice, "the soul of this noble woman, which so studiously in her life was occupied in good works, and with a fast faith of Christ and the sacraments of his Church. . . . She whom I have many times heard say, that if the Christian princes would have warred upon the enemies of his Faith, she would be glad yet to go follow the host and help

[1] Mullinger.

to wash their clothes for the love of Jesus." She at whose death the students of both Universities, to whom she was a mother, "had cause of weeping."

Bishop Fisher's own memorial to his friend was worthy of them both—the foundation of St John's College at Cambridge, despite gigantic difficulties on every side which would have broken the spirit of many lesser men. But the deepest ambition of his life, and the final, highest aim of Lady Margaret's were at stake, and, as her executor, he stood committed to the realisation of her last wishes as a sacred trust.

When the Countess planned a second college for Cambridge, she adapted the ancient, decayed Hospital of St John; a small religious almshouse dating from 1135, but fallen upon evil times and scandalously neglected, so that in 1509 it contained only two brethren. She obtained leave to suppress it, and to found on the site a great college for secular priests.

From the first this foundation was signed with the cross; obstacles of all kinds attended it as markedly as they had been absent from the establishing of Christ's. First of all, the hospital revenues were quite

inadequate to the new design, which placed Lady Margaret under the awkward necessity of revoking certain grants she had made to Westminster Abbey. This required the royal sanction—and just then the King happened to be engrossed in his own new chapel there.

With her usual wisdom, she entrusted the matter to Bishop Fisher; and he, after the unfathomable fashion of saintly souls, carried the delicate negotiation through with complete success.

But before the legal processes could be effected, the King died; and two months later the Countess herself went to her reward. As the large sums involved could therefore be claimed by the new king, Henry VIII, the entire project stood in grave danger.

It was then that John Fisher came to the rescue; and, like the gallant, intrepid fighter he was, pledged himself to the cause, and fought doggedly for sixteen harassing years to carry out the last wishes of his friend, "the greatest benefactress Cambridge has ever known." Baker, the historian of St John's, justly says: "Had she not lodged this trust in faithful hands, this great and good dowry must have died

with her." That it did not was due to John Fisher's almost unaided efforts.

On April 9, 1511, the executors drew up the foundation charter of the College of St John the Evangelist, absorbing the old hospital, with papal and royal consent, and at the same time Robert Shorton was elected first Master, also three Fellows nominated by the Bishop of Ely. Four of the executors were laymen, who took practically no part in the scheme; of the four ecclesiastics, one was Fisher's friend, Fox, Bishop of Winchester and Master of Pembroke. But not only was he an Oxford man, inclined to reserve his sympathies exclusively for his own University, but he was also an intimate friend of Wolsey, who was generally suspected of being the main opponent of St John's. And he was at that time involved in a lawsuit with the Primate, Archbishop Warham, who was friendly to the scheme and habitually opposed to Wolsey.

Ashton (one of the witnesses of Fisher's consecration) was a distinguished benefactor to the college, but at that time seems to have been unable to give active help. Hornby alone—a Fellow of Michaelhouse and Master of Peterhouse—could be counted upon for whole-hearted support. How

many of us recalling these historical facts can sympathise, from the depths of our own experience, with the Chancellor, faced with this disheartening situation, so soon after the loss of the good King and of that incomparable lady, his mother? Sadly and anxiously Fisher took up the burden, which devolved upon him because he alone had the will-power to achieve success despite every obstacle.

It now depended entirely upon the young King's pleasure whether the foundress's undoubted intentions should be realised or not. And Henry VIII was not naturally inclined to part with a vast sum of money. The unhappy executors could only hope that the King might prove generous; meantime they took the bold line of proceeding with the building as though taking for granted that Lady Margaret's wishes would be carried out.

Then a further difficulty developed. The Countess's unworthy stepson, James Stanley, Bishop of Ely, persistently delayed the final steps in the dissolution of the hospital. And now her influence could no longer be employed upon him.

But the foundress had a doughty champion in John Fisher. He referred the case

to Rome. There his efforts were rewarded with a Papal Bull—but this arrived only to be found deficient in certain items and formalities, which made it quite useless.

But, nothing daunted, Fisher applied for a second Bull. This time he called forth the living thunders of the Holy See; " . . . it struck the old house at one blow, and did both dissolve and build anew, without consent either of the King or the Bishop of Ely "—for Pope " Julius Exclusus " was called a Son of Thunder. Thus the great college of St John owes its victorious existence directly to the supreme power of the Pope.

Meanwhile, the Master and three Fellows were in receipt of their pensions and lodged in the town; the former doing his utmost to hurry on the new buildings, by way of establishing the claim which was still awaiting the royal decision. At Court, Archbishop Warham, who was also Chancellor of England, befriended the cause of the infant society.

At last the lawsuit dragged to its close, and the validity of the bequest was recognised. The devoted fighters drew breath for a sigh of thankful relief now the worst danger was past.

And then came the news that the King had brought a fresh suit! Instigated by 'some potent courtiers.'

Realising that a second contest would be foredoomed to expensive failure, the executors reluctantly gave up their claim; Lady Margaret's magnificent endowment was lost to the college for ever.

Fisher was worsted, but he was not yet beaten. He now applied for compensation for the heavy loss, and, with great difficulty, succeeded in obtaining a grant of the revenues of another decayed "God's House" at Ospringe, in Kent. With this, and the original hospital funds, and some minor estates willed by Lady Margaret, St John's was at last founded—an enduring monument to John Fisher's indomitable patience and courage. After this epic struggle, Bishop Fisher presided at the opening ceremony in July, 1516. His presence there was due to yet another disappointment; he had been delegated to the Lateran Council in Rome, and was looking forward to taking his friend Erasmus with him as his theologian (no small tribute to the orthodoxy of the great scholar). But the project fell through, and the disappointment was in some measure redeemed by the

success of the claim for compensation, followed by the opening of the college.

Fisher came up from Rochester (having just received a copy of Erasmus' work, the *Novum Instrumentum,* which he hastened to acknowledge), fully empowered by his co-executors to establish the new society. A fresh Master, Alan Percy, was chosen, thirty-one Fellows were elected, and the statutes given were the same as those of Christ's; thus two colleges were putting to practical test Fisher's ideals of college discipline.

And so his first contest with Henry VIII ended in essential victory; for St John's came into existence, though robbed of the greater part of its endowment. The Bishop himself did all he could to compensate the foundation, over which he watched with fatherly care for the rest of his life. Besides a gift of £500 and a sum for the purchase of land worth £60 a year, he founded four Fellowships (three for Yorkshiremen and one for the Diocese of Rochester) and two scholarships; appointed four examiners and two lecturers—Greek for juniors and Hebrew for seniors. He arranged for twenty-four trentals of Masses to be distributed annually to the poorest and

worthiest priests of the college; and he lavished valuable gifts upon the chapel, including a set of vestments of red cloth of gold worth £600—possibly given him by Lady Margaret.

In the statutes Bishop Fisher explains his munificence thus: "... the foundress of this college, in her great condescension had a great desire to procure me a richer bishopric. But when she saw that her approaching death would frustrate this desire, she left me a no small sum of money to use according to my own will and for my own purposes, which I mention lest anyone should think that I have made this large endowment with other people's money. Now, as I receive from the annual revenue of the bishopric of Rochester quite enough for the decent maintenance of a prelate, and since the college has sustained certain losses, I have considered that it was better that both that legacy of hers, and also a considerable addition of my own, should be spent for the good of my own soul, in the education of theologians, than squandered on my relatives, or wickedly and uselessly consumed for other vain purposes, according to the custom of the world. And this I do, not only for my own soul, but by

my example to excite others to lend a helping hand to the college."[1]

He also prepared his own tomb in the chapel, little dreaming of the glorious future that was to make his name, honoured in his lifetime, renowned throughout the universal Church while his body lay in a traitor's grave.

Finally, the holy Bishop spent much labour upon the revision of the college statutes, enriching them with precise details which make fascinating reading and tempt quotation. Great stress is laid upon the duty of praying for the souls of founders and benefactors; upon preaching and the study of theology. All theological students "were required regularly to attend the sermons, and were expressly enjoined 'not to mock the preacher either by word, gesture, or expression of countenance'"—an interesting sidelight, which really seems rather stringent!

Whenever, in the winter season, a fire was lighted in hall 'in honour of God and the saints,' the Fellows, scholars, and servants might stay to amuse themselves; but neither singing, dancing, nor music, nor any other noisy pastime was to be allowed

[1] Bridgett.

in chambers. As a 'symbol of unity,' Fellows and scholars were to wear gowns of one colour, which, with hoods for graduates, were yearly to be supplied to them at the time of the Stourbridge Fair. Another of the benefits which Cambridge owes to John Fisher is the peaceable introduction of the New Learning, which was revivifying the academic system abroad, and had long aroused deep interest in England. It was by his invitation that Erasmus, lifelong friend of Fisher and More, came to Cambridge in 1511 to teach Greek. The Chancellor obtained for him the Regius Readership in Greek and the Lady Margaret Professorship in Divinity. He had rooms at Queens', and there he spent long hours of labour upon his *Novum Instrumentum* and his revision of St Jerome's works. Though his three years in Cambridge were undoubtedly a disappointment to him, he made several enduring friends there, and later on his work bore good fruit. In 1518, Fisher was able to tell him that in place of the old sophistical arguments, wholesome, sober disputations were now carried on between the theologians, at the end of which they were not only more learned, but also better men.

Though the tide of heresy swept over England after his death, submerging his beloved University, so that the colleges for which he laboured so devotedly used all that they owed to him to oppose those doctrines in defence of which he died, yet students were not wanting who were worthy of their traditions. Of the seventeen martyrs Cambridge gave to the Church at that period, one was from Christ's—Ven. Ralph Crockett, priest, hanged at Chichester, October 1, 1588—and no less than four were from St John's. Two priests, Ven. John Nutter, a north-countryman, who suffered at Tyburn, February 12, 1584, and Ven. William Andleby, a Yorkshireman, martyred at York, July 4, 1597; and of the two laymen, one was Ven. Richard White, who, after apostatising and repenting, became the proto-martyr of Wales, and was hanged, drawn, and quartered at Wrexham, October 17, 1584. The other was that very gallant gentleman, Ven. Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, who wasted to death in the Tower of London, after ten years' imprisonment, October 19, 1595.

Nor were the fit heirs of such martyrs lacking in later times. In 1850, a certain student of St John's left without a degree

because he refused the then necessary oath of royal supremacy, having found his way back to the Faith of his great founders—and so suffered all that a man might in these more peaceful days for the very same cause which gained Blessed John Fisher the martyr's crown.

"When . . . I first entered the refectory or hall of St John's," he tells us, "my attention was at once arrested by the portraits of the foundress . . . and her confessor, John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester; and the quaint rebus of a fish and an ear (of corn) in the coat-of-arms of the latter, in the chapel window, somewhat distracted my mind amid psalms and prayer. I wished at once to know something of those worthies, and as the senior tutor of my college, Dr. Hymers, had reprinted Fisher's funeral sermon of Lady Margaret, with notes, I was soon able not so much to satisfy as to excite still more my curiosity. . . . I soon purchased a copy of the first edition of Fisher's first treatise against Luther, printed in 1523, and, without entering very deeply into controversy, I received a deep impression of the violence and malice of the Reformers, and a gentle drawing towards the defenders of the old faith, which all subsequent

studies increased. Though I read no more of Fisher's writings at that time, his spotless character and heroic death gave weight to other arguments, which made me refuse the oath . . . and thus obliged me to leave Cambridge in 1850 and seek reconciliation with the Catholic Church." He was rewarded with a vocation to the priesthood, and the student whom John Fisher thus guided back to the original purpose of the foundress became known as his biographer, Father T. E. Bridgett, C.SS.R.

CHAPTER V

AUTHOR AND PREACHER

WHEN John Fisher reached middle life he had already restored the stunted life and fortunes of his University, by the combined force of his own shining example and the influence which that and his profound learning had given him. How far-reaching that reforming influence was we can only guess; certainly many good and able priests went forth from the colleges he watched over, and those two he helped to found. Within his own diocese his beneficent power was soon felt; but there was another sphere of his stupendous labours which extended throughout England and across Europe—the defence of the Faith against the new German heresy originated by Luther.

Early in his career, John Fisher was marked out as a great preacher. From then onwards his light was to shine before all men; for he was one of those rare souls who are born for both earthly and heavenly greatness. His printed words live to our

own day. Several of his sermons have come down to us; and if, to our modern ideas, they seem remarkably lengthy, such was the custom of the time. These long discourses were usually delivered on public occasions, after the manner of orations, as distinguished from the short instruction given at Mass.

As Bishop Fisher deplored the prevailing artificial and ambitious style of preaching, so did he oppose the stultifying fashion of reading the sermon. Here, again, he gave the lead by his own example, sparing himself no pains to effect this reform in his own diocese; "not only in his younger days, when health served, but also even to his extreme age, when many times his weary and feeble legs were not able to sustain his weak body standing, but forced him to have a chair, and so to teach sitting."[1]

It was only by the persuasions of his friends that the Bishop was led to publish his sermons. To Lady Margaret we are indebted for that early series on the Penitential Psalms, preached at her request, in her presence, and published at her desire; as was also the funeral sermon of her son, Henry VII. Her own wide fame caused the

[1] Hall.

publication of her panegyric, preached by Fisher at her 'month's mind.' Father Bridgett observes that few European languages possess sermons in the vernacular of so early a date. He also reminds us that during his Vice-Chancellorship, Fisher obtained a Bull from the Pope, Alexander VI, in 1503, empowering the University to make an annual appointment of twelve doctors, or masters, to preach the Word of God in all parts of England, Scotland, and Ireland, both to the clergy and the people.

The King's command gave us the printed form of the sermon against Luther "had at Paulis"—that is, preached at St Paul's Cross. The occasion was a solemn burning of Luther's and other heretics' books there on Sunday, May 12, 1521; a declaration of war against the German heresy then in its infancy, but soon to lay waste Catholic England. It must have been a very inspiring scene—the brilliant gathering that May day in the shadow of Old St Paul's, the symbolic blaze of those pestilential books. The assembly was presided over by Cardinal Wolsey in splendid state; the Pope's ambassador and the learned, devout Archbishop of Canterbury, Warham, were on his

right; and on his left, the Imperial ambassador and the Bishop of Durham; the other members of the English hierarchy being seated round them. That learned and famous orator, the Bishop of Rochester, had been chosen to preach, and took for his subject the supremacy of the Pope.

Henry VIII admired the sermon so much that Pace, his Latin secretary, translated it into that language, and so it came to be printed. But, in later years, the King found this sermon less to his taste, and hated it so bitterly that he ordered every copy to be sent to Cromwell for destruction.

Bishop Fisher preached at St Paul's on a somewhat similar occasion—the public recantation of Dr. Barnes, prior of the Cambridge Augustinians, in 1527; but this sermon has not been preserved. This man called forth a notable example of the gentle forbearance that Fisher—so severe on himself—ever showed to the erring. Dr. Barnes, who had associated himself with a Lutheran faction at the University, though he always refused to hold their doctrine, was cited before the Vice-Chancellor and also before six bishops in London in consequence of a violent sermon he had preached on Christmas Eve, when he launched into a torrent

of abuse of the clergy, the bishops, and even of the all-powerful Cardinal Wolsey himself.

Evidently the Bishop of Rochester did not wish to judge this hot-headed action too hardly; since, when the first accusation —that of contempt for holy days—was read out, he said that he, for one, "would not condemn it as heresy for a hundred pounds." Then, turning to the prior, he added: "But it was a foolish thing to preach this before all the butchers of Cambridge."

However, Dr. Barnes was found guilty, and, as he promised to retract, was ordered to do public penance. On Quinquagesima Sunday, 1527, he came in procession to the north door of St Paul's with other penitents, each bearing a faggot, and after the Bishop of Rochester had preached before eighteen bishops, and many abbots and priors, the penitents made their confession of heresy, throwing their faggots into the fire, on which blazed numbers of heretical books and copies of Tyndall's New Testament, and at last the bishop absolved them from their censures.[1] An awesome spectacle, which must have done much to rouse a

[1] See Bridgett, p. 52.

deep horror of heresy and its consequences in the heart of everyone present, as was intended.

Cambridge was the scene of another anti-Lutheran demonstration during Fisher's Chancellorship. His early biographer, Dr. Hall, relates the matter at length (on the testimony of an eyewitness) in his original work, which Father Bridgett quotes. Briefly, the facts were these: Fisher, as Chancellor, published Leo X's grant of indulgences, specially applicable to those who opposed the Lutheran heresies. During the night, Peter of Valence, a Norman priest tainted with this heresy (who had taken refuge in Cambridge and was spreading the poison there), wrote above the document: "Blessed is the man whose hope is in the Name of the Lord, and who has not regarded vanity or mad follies—*such as these.*"

Unable to trace the author of this outrage, the Chancellor published an excommunication, but promised pardon on condition of even secret confession of guilt; "the fact of which, but not the person, the confessor should have leave to make known to the bishop." But the offender remained silent; so at last, after the customary three admonitions, the Chancellor had no choice but to

pronounce the excommunication. But so great was his grief and horror that he could not force himself to speak the terrible words. Eventually, amid a great crowd, he solemnly published the sentence, with weeping and lamentation, "which struck such a fear into the hearts of his hearers, when they heard his fearful and terrible words, that most of them being present, especially of the younger sort, looked when the ground should have opened and swallowed (the culprit) up presently before them, *as a right reverend and worthy prelate once told me, which then was a young man and present at all the business,* such was the bitterness of his words and gravity of his sentence."

But such was the effect of "this holy man's zealous words and pitiful tears, spent in compassion of the wretched soul" that the unhappy priest could not forget; although necessity drove him to take a post in Dr. Goodrich's heretical household, "yet could he never be brought to think otherwise but that he had sore offended Almighty God in contemning him in one of his so worthy Vicars." There appears to be reason to hope that the holy bishop's martyrdom completed the priest's repentance.

Luther's theses on indulgences appeared in 1518; and though he wrote to the Pope submissively in the following year, and later protested in a letter to the Emperor Charles V that he would 'die an obedient child of the Church,' he published his *Captivity of Babylon* in October, 1520, and broke away from the Church once for all; in December he publicly burnt the Papal Bull and Canon Law in Wittenberg. "But other heretics were springing up, and wise men, even at these first beginnings of the Reformation, augured what would be its ultimate results in general infidelity."

Powerful protectors were watching over the Universities. Archbishop Warham wrote to Wolsey about the danger of heresy at Oxford through the circulation of Luther's books, despite the Cardinal's prohibition; and declared proudly that "Oxford has been void of all heresies, and Cambridge boasts that it has never been defiled." He begs that Wolsey will ask the Bishop of Rochester or London (Tunstal) to make out a list of these forbidden Lutheran works and send it to Oxford.

John Fisher attained considerable fame as an author of theological works, which circulated widely at home and abroad in

his own lifetime and long afterwards. His first controversial book was a treatise on St Mary Magdalen, *De Unica Magdalena* (1519). This was composed in answer to Le Fèvre, a learned Dominican greatly esteemed by the Humanist party. He had written a book contending that "Catholic popular tradition had attributed to one person what is said in the Gospel of no less than three; or that three Marys—the converted sinner, the sister of Martha, and the woman out of whom our Lord cast seven devils—have been erroneously confounded together into one Mary Magdalen."

Owing to its author's reputation, Le Fèvre's book went into two editions; and the Bishop of Paris, being in England on an embassy, asked the Bishop of Rochester's opinion. That learned prelate had disliked what he had read of the book, but presumed that such a writer was well informed on the subject. Now, however, he made a study of the Scripture account, and of the commentators down the centuries, and re-read Le Fèvre's work. The result was entirely in favour of the accepted tradition and exposed the carping, critical spirit of the Dominican. Fisher's reply to him, *De Unica Magdalena,* was published in

Paris, despite the apprehensive reluctance of printers, by Erasmus' influence, and went through two editions. In a letter to the Bishop on the subject of this book, Erasmus alludes to another of Fisher's works which is not extant: "... that commentary, of which you showed me some specimens which greatly delighted me, in which you trace out the order and connection of the Gospel history."

To John Fisher belongs the honour of having written the first books published in answer to the new heresies propagated by Luther and his followers. They have been described by his biographer as "monuments of prodigious learning and acumen," entirely the fruit of his own profound erudition, "the arguments all the result of his own thought"—and, it may be added, of his prayers and penances which gave such power to all his work—"yet, as manuals of controversy, they have been superseded by later writings which they helped to create. The standard writers, such as Bellarmine and Stapleton, are not slow to acknowledge the debt they owe to Fisher (Roffensis)." Father Bridgett describes the general style as "serious and majestic," but gives quotations illustrating his keen sense of the

ridiculous and his sarcastic contempt for noisy pretension.

The next occasion on which the Bishop took up his powerful pen was to refute Luther's scurrilous reply to Henry VIII's famous book, which earned for that King the title of Defender of the Faith. Fisher's book was dedicated to Nicholas West, Bishop of Ely, and was called *A Defence of the Assertions of the King of England against Luther's Babylonian Captivity*, or, more shortly, *Against the Babylonian Captivity*. Publication was delayed owing to rumours of Luther's recantation, but the volume appeared at Cologne in 1525.

Meantime, Bishop Fisher had written another controversial book, which appeared at the same time, *Defence of the Sacred Priesthood Against Luther*, a subject on which the holy man was singularly well qualified to write. The third of his five anti-Lutheran works, *Lutheranæ Assertionis Confutatio*, answered the apostate's "articles" on the occasion of his burning of the Papal Bull. No sooner was this book published than its indefatigable author met with Ulrich Weller's attempt to prove that St Peter had never visited Rome. In order to substantiate his own arguments for the

supremacy of the Pope, Fisher composed a learned reply.

These valuable works, though much esteemed by the wisest men of the day, naturally found little favour in Germany. In 1529, Erasmus, writing of the situation there, deplores that "even the books of John, Bishop of Rochester, a man who had every quality of a theologian," were "utterly neglected." A few years earlier he had said: "No one dares to print anything written against Luther, nor read what has been printed elsewhere." The Bishop himself wrote: "I think the world was never before so generally inclined to listen to heresy as it is now." But he was fully alive to the abuses in the individual lives of many of the churchmen of his day; he did not hesitate to condemn even the luxuries of the Papal Court, of the legate, Wolsey, and of his brother bishops. Then he warns Luther of the real aim underlying his revolt—to attack the Papacy.

"You were grieved to hear of all the troubles which the Romans inflict on your Germans. . . . Yet, however dear your country may be to you, the religious life of which you have made profession obliges you to hold dearer still God and his Scrip-

tures. But you strive in vain against God. You know the saying of Gamaliel: 'If it is of God, it will stand.' Yes, the Roman Church will stand, whether you will or no. You may, indeed, be the founder of a schism; for St Paul predicted that a 'revolt' would come. But woe to that man by whom the revolt comes. After you have done all, Luther, the successor of St Peter will remain; and if he will but endeavour to reform the morals of his court, I doubt not you will greatly repent of all you are doing."

Again, he declares to Luther: "We answer as to all—they withdrew themselves from obedience to the Roman Pontiff, either from malice or from pardonable ignorance. And I would rather believe it is the latter, in the case of some at least, as many of the simpler sort who are led into error by interpreters of Scripture, such as you, or perhaps have never heard any discussion at all on this matter. And such I would not easily condemn, if their separation is due to no depravity of their minds, and if they implicitly believe this truth also, and would believe it willingly provided they were taught it. But as to those who have separated themselves maliciously, I assert openly

that they no more belong to the orthodox Church than the churches of the Arians, the Donatists, or the like."

The vigour and bitterness of heart with which John Fisher led the crusade against error rose from the appalling fact that he was dealing, not with unfortunate souls born in ignorance, but with the followers of Judas—apostate priests and religious. Well might the saintly bishop cry from the depths of his afflicted heart: "O God, who can patiently hear such impious falsehoods cast upon the mysteries of Christ? Who can read such blasphemies without bitter grief and tears if he has but the least spark of Christian piety in his breast?"

But his pen, mighty as it was, was never the chief weapon John Fisher used in his whole-soul fighting in this holy war. None knew better than he that "this kind is not cast out except by prayer and fasting"; and besides the loving reparation he made by his own holy life, he laboured long and arduously in fastings, penances, and prayer.

The last of his controversial books was instigated by the heresy of Œcolampadius; it was entitled *On the Truth of Christ's Body and Blood in the Eucharist, against*

John Œcolampadius. Father Bridgett says it is the longest and most important of all his writings, and "there are many beautiful passages showing his lively faith and tender love for that great mystery." Erasmus took prompt exception to this heretic's attempt to enlist his name in support of heresy, as "our great Erasmus." He fears that it may lay him under the suspicions of the Pope, the Emperor, the King of England, the Bishop of Rochester, the Cardinal of York. He was then living in Basel for the sake of his health and the facilities for printing, but wrote in 1529: "I have grown used to this nest for many years, but for the future I commit myself to the providence of Christ. I shall do what befits an orthodox man, and care more for piety than for health. For to remain here, where it is not allowed to offer sacrifice or to receive the Lord's Body, would be nothing else than to make profession with them. Œcolampadius has possession of all the churches." And so the aging and always ailing scholar removed to Fribourg, "where he remained seven years; but having returned to Basel on business, with the intention of not remaining there, he fell ill and could not leave, and ended his days without priest,

or any help from the Church, but pronouncing the Holy Name and calling on the mercy of God." Yet surely aided by the prayers of the two glorious martyrs who, loving him so faithfully on earth, had gone to their reward a year before his lonely death.

We are fortunate in possessing Blessed Thomas More's verdict on Fisher's works:

"The Rev. Father John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, a man illustrious not only by the vastness of his erudition, but much more so by the purity of his life, had so opened and overthrown the assertions of Luther, that if he has any shame he would give a great deal to have burnt his assertions. . . . As regards the Primacy of the Roman Pontiff, the same Bishop of Rochester has made the matter so clear from the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and from the whole of the Old Testament, and from the consent of all the holy Fathers, not of the Latins only, but of the Greeks also (of whose opposition Luther is wont to boast), and from the definitions of a General Council, in which the Armenians and Greeks, who at that time had been most obstinately resisting, were overcome, and acknowledged themselves overcome, that it would be

utterly superfluous for me to write again on the subject.

"I am moved to obedience to that See, not only by what learned and holy men have written, but by this fact especially, that we so often see that, on the one hand, every enemy of the Christian faith makes war on that See, and that, on the other hand, no one has ever declared himself an enemy of that See who has not also shortly after shown most evidently that he was the enemy of Christ and the Christian religion."

Such is the living power of the holy Bishop's works that they are still read, and, as we have seen, were instrumental in the heroic conversion of his modern biographer, Father Bridgett, in 1850. But the secret of their efficacy was that of their author himself, who answered a Carthusian monk's praise of his zealous campaign against the Lutherans by saying that "he wished that time of writing had been spent in prayer, thinking that prayer would have done more good, and was of more merit."

CHAPTER VI

THE MODEL BISHOP

DURING the thirty-one years he ruled the Diocese of Rochester, John Fisher became known throughout Europe as the model of a perfect bishop. Gigantic as were his labours for the University, for the cause of learning in general, for the universal Church in the war on heresy, yet we may be quite sure that his own flock always came first. It remains a marvel that any one man could accomplish so much, still maintaining his own studies, and making time for the great work of penitential prayer that he esteemed most of all.

The testimony of the eminent men of his day was unanimously in his praise. Erasmus wrote to Reuchlin in 1520: "There is not in that nation a more learned man nor a holier bishop." King Henry himself, as Cardinal Pole relates, "before the violence of his passion had hurried him out of the reach of reason and reflection," was "accustomed . . . to glory that no other prince or kingdom had so distinguished a prelate,

Of this I was witness, when, turning to me, on my return from my travels, he said that he did not imagine I had met with anyone, in foreign parts, who could be compared to him, either for virtue or learning." The Bishop always had the best interests of the King very much at heart:

"He constantly professed, that besides the obligation common to all subjects, he had that of the King being born in his diocese (at Greenwich), and residing in it more frequently than elsewhere; and that His Majesty's grandmother, whose ghostly father he had been, and who survived the late King and Queen, had recommended her grandson to his peculiar care. She was a person of great prudence, who was aware of the dangers of royalty, when it falls to the lot of youth; and, being about to leave the world, she, with many tears, entreated the Bishop, though several excellent men were also present, to assist the King by his intructions and advice, and desired her grandson to have a deference for him preferably to all others, as what would most contribute to his felicity both here and hereafter. He had, moreover, this inducement to be vigilant in the King's welfare, as he was the only surviving counsellor of his late

majesty." Thus fully did he fulfil the consecration oath of allegiance to King as well as Pope, which was then customary for English bishops.

Bishop Fisher's own daily life was an eminent example of apostolic simplicity. Though Rochester, being the poorest diocese in England, only yielded £300 a year, and several of his predecessors had been promoted to wealthier sees, Fisher preferred the minor responsibility—both as regards numbers of souls and amount of revenue; he would say, with an echo of his friend Thomas More's spirit, "that he would not desert his poor old wife for the richest widow in England!"

He was the last bishop to live in the ruinous old palace by the cathedral and the river, built in 1450. Some remains of it are still to be seen at this day. In addition, he possessed manor houses at Halling, Bromley, and Trottescliffe, as well as a town house at Lambeth, used when his duties in Church or State necessitated a London residence. This house, "La Place," was by the riverside, near the present Westminster Bridge; it was sold by the Parliament of 1647 and destroyed. He never left Rochester except when obliged by reason

of Court duties, convocation, and University business.

Bishop Fisher allotted a definite portion of his revenues to the repair and upkeep of his cathedral. The shrine of St William of Perth must have carried his mind back to his boyhood's days at Beverley, with its shrine of St John in the old Minster. The company of the Benedictine monks, who performed the offices in the cathedral, would be very pleasing to the Bishop, who greatly loved the monastic life. Though the church that John Fisher knew has been grievously 'restored,' much of the old building yet remains; Norman and Early English work, the splendid crypt, the old wall painting of the Wheel of Fortune on the north wall of the choir, the Chapter House of the monks (with its rich doorway), now used as the library, housing treasures of manuscript which were old when he was elected to the see—such as the twelfth century *Textus Roffensis*, and the early fourteenth century *Costumale*, compiled by the monk, John of Westerham, relating to the property of the priory.

The glory has departed from the Lady Chapel, and those of St John and St Edmund, and the rich shrine of St William

of Perth. But, building better than they knew, the moderns who erected the present choir-screen as a memorial to Dean Scott (of Liddell and Scott fame), included among the stone figures sculptured thereon, Blessed John Fisher! Thus strangely comes his statue to be in a place of honour in his own alienated cathedral.

To help his own devotion, as his early biographer, Dr. Hall, says, "he caused a great hole to be digged through the wall of his church of Rochester, whereby he might the more commodiously have prospect into the church at Mass and Evensong times." Furthermore, he never omitted any of his daily service, which he used to say by himself, most reverently and devoutly, pronouncing every word, as though devouring heavenly food. When he said Mass, his devotion was so intense that often the tears would run down his cheeks. To keep the thought of death before him he always had a skull set on one end of the altar, and placed before him at table. He always showed a special reverence for the Name of Jesus.

Bishop Fisher began his episcopate by making a thorough visitation of his diocese (in the course of which he would doubtless

meet his Dominican sister at Dartford Convent), correcting abuses, preaching, confirming, and helping all who were in need. He attended first of all to the state of his clergy, for, as he said in those early sermons on the Penitential Psalms, "all fear of God, also the contempt of God, cometh and is grounded of the clergy." Upright and fearless as ever, he removed and punished the unworthy rigorously. Preaching on the words "My neighbours stood afar off," he declared that pastors, who ought to be the nearest neighbours of all, stand aloof either by bodily absence or by silence. "Bishops be absent from their dioceses and parsons from their churches. . . . We use bypaths and circumlocution in rebuking. We go nothing nigh to the matter, and so in the mean season the people perish with their sins." His next care was for the poor and the sick, and his tender devotion to them is illustrated in Dr. Hall's narrative, gathered from those who knew him: "To poor sick persons he was a physician, to the lame he was a staff, to poor widows an advocate, to orphans a tutor, and to poor travellers a host. Wheresoever he lay, either at Rochester or elsewhere, his order was to inquire

where any poor sick folks lay near him, which after he once knew he would diligently visit them, and where he saw any of them likely to die, he would preach to them, teaching them the way to die with such godly persuasions that for the most part he never departed till the sick persons were well satisfied and contented with death."

In those days of turf or wood fires he often entered poor houses without chimneys which so reeked with smoke that few could endure it. But the Bishop would sit by the sick patient for three or four hours in all the smoke, when his servants were driven to wait outside. In other poor homes lacking stairs he would always climb up by a ladder for so good a purpose. When he had given comfort to their souls, he would leave charitable alms behind him, charging his steward to prepare suitable food daily for the invalids and send it to them. He gave daily alms at his own gate to no small number of poor people, according to their needs. To insure just distribution, he himself would go immediately after dinner and watch the distribution with his own eyes.

He gave a shining example of the great virtue of hospitality, entertaining any strangers who came at his own table accord-

ing to their rank, "with such mirth as stood with the gravity of his person, whose talk was always rather of learning or contemplation than of worldly matters." At other times he sat with his chaplains, usually grave and learned men, to whom he would propound some deep question, to encourage study of the hid mysteries of religion and to spend meal-times in talk "pleasant, profitable, and comfortable to the waiters and standers-by."

For himself, he fasted rigorously and never spent a full hour at any meal. His table was plentiful and good for all except himself. He ate and drank by weight and measure even on non-fasting days. His staple diet was thin pottage, sodden with flesh; he ate very sparingly of meat. He kept the ordinary fasts of the Church strictly, adding many other fasts of his own particular devotion. This was evident from his thin and weak body, and though not much flesh was left upon it, he would punish the very skin and bones upon his back. More often than not he wore a hair-shirt, and often scourged himself secretly.

But even in his austerities he used that admirable common sense which is almost a virtue in itself. So he lived till his old

age, when he had to relax those severe fasts. He was weakened by consumption, "wherefore by counsel of his physician and licence of his ghostly father, he used upon some fasting days to comfort himself with a little thin gruel made for the purpose."

The Bishop minimised his worldly cares by a wise and just economy. He placed his layman-brother, Robert, in charge of his household as steward, allotting a portion of his revenues for expenses, with instructions that he must not be run into debt. His servants were plainly clad, and he encouraged them to be thrifty; he often lent them money and never asked for it again, and when it was offered he would forgive it. He maintained peace and order by a simple method of discipline; if any of his household committed a fault he would first investigate the matter himself, and punish a first offender with words only, but so severely that the culprit was very loath to come before him a second time. Thus his household "continued in great quietness and peace, every man knowing what belonged to his duty."

Always a true patron of learning, he ever encouraged the studious, whom he specially liked, helping them with his labour and

sometimes with his money. But idleness and sloth he could by no means endure in his house, as being the fount of many evils. Thus he so ordered his 'family' that his biographer likens it to a monastery, and "for learning a university." A second part of his income was set apart for the "relief of poverty and the maintenance of scholars."

As his outward life was a model of such great virtues—charity, justice, hospitality, wisdom, together with fasting, almsdeeds, penances, and much else—so his spiritual life was the golden example it had ever been, growing in grace towards perfection with the passing of the years. At night he would dismiss his servants and pray a long while. Then he lay down on a poor, hard couch of straw and mats in his closet near the cathedral, where he might look into the choir and listen to the monks chanting the Divine Office. He never rested more than four hours at a time, but rose and continued his devout prayers.

We can gain some idea of the simple poverty of his palace from the inventory taken by the commissioners at the confiscation of his goods when he was imprisoned for refusing the Oath of Succession. It contains such items as—

"*In his own bedchamber.* A mattrass, a counterpoint of red cloth lined with canvas. A celer and tester of old red velvet, nothing worth. A leather chair with a cushion. An altar with a hanging of white and green satin of Brydges (Bruges), with our Lord embroidered on it. Two blue sarcenet curtains. A cupboard with a cloth. A little chair covered with leather and a cushion. A close stool and an old cushion upon it. An andiron, a fire pan, and a fire shovel.

"*In the great study within the same chamber.* A long spruce table and other tables. Three leather chairs. Fire irons. Eight round desks and shelves for books.

"*In the north study.* Divers glasses with waters and syrups, and boxes of marmalade, which were delivered to his servants. A table, four round desks and bookshelves. . . .

"*In the chapel in the end of the south gallery.* A cushion in the seat of the chapel, the altar-cloths, two pieces of old velvet, and a superaltare (altar-stone). Four gilt images with a crucifix.

"*In the broad gallery.* Old hangings of green say. Old carpets of tapestry set under the said books. An altar-cloth painted with green velvet and yellow damask. A St

John's head standing at the end of the altar. A pontifical book. A painted cloth of the image of Jesus taken down from the cross. Two old sarcenets.

"*In the old gallery.* Certain old books pertaining to divers monasteries. . . .

"*In the great chapel.* The altar hung with white sarcenet, with red sarcenet crosses, and under it two hangings of yellow satin, of Brydges, and blue damask; eight gilt images upon the altar; two laten candlesticks. A diaper cloth upon the altar, and hanging over it. A pix, with a cloth hanging over it, garnished with gold, with tassels of red silk and gold. At the ends of the altar, two curtains of red sarcenet upon the desk where he sits. . . . A Mass book. An old carpet on the ground before the altar. Hangings of painted red say. An altar beneath, in the same chapel, hung with old dornexe, and a painted cloth of the three kings of Coleyn. Five images of timber. A table of Doomsday. A crucifix with images of the Father and Holy Ghost. . . ."

Such are a few of the items enumerated. It was in the great library that most of the Bishop's time was spent when he was at leisure. Here he gathered one of the

best private collections of books in England, and perhaps in Europe; setting aside a part of the episcopal revenues for 'the buying of books.' He destined this library for his beloved college of St John, at Cambridge, but the splendid bequest was never to reach the University.

Erasmus, who stayed here with his friend the Bishop in August, 1516, has left us his impressions of the library in a letter to his host written some time later.

"... I shrewdly suspect that the state of your health principally depends upon your situation. The near approach of the tide, as well as the mud which is left exposed at every reflux of the water, renders the climate unwholesome. Your library, too, is surrounded with glass windows, which let the keen air through the crevices. I know how much time you spend in the library, which is to you a very paradise. As to me, I could not live in such a place three hours without being sick."

In addition to all his active duties, the struggle for St John's during sixteen years, and the writing of his learned treatises, the Bishop read exhaustively and maintained the high level of his own scholarship in a manner that was nothing short of marvel-

lous in so busy a man. He had reached middle life when he mastered Greek and Hebrew.

Despite his interest in the study of Greek, John Fisher's own knowledge of it was not acquired in his University days. The main impulse to master it was evidently supplied by the *Novum Instrumentum* of Erasmus in 1516. Having attained a certain familiarity with the language, the Bishop writes to ask the famous scholar to introduce him to a master. Thereupon both Erasmus and Thomas More pressed William Latimer, who had studied in Italy, to give the required instruction. He was reluctant, but whether he eventually complied or not is not known.

The Bishop learnt his Hebrew from a Cambridge man of renown, Robert Wakefield, about the year 1519. He also found time to enjoy a new treatise on logic and rhetoric recommended to him by Erasmus—Agricola's *De Inventione Dialectica*.

Three times was Bishop Fisher disappointed in his great desire to go to Rome, and venerate the Tomb of the Apostles and other holy places. First, in 1512, when he was appointed King's Orator in the Council of the Lateran, and for some reason un-

known to posterity the commission was revoked; again, about two years later, when the Council continued under the newly elected Pope Leo X. On this occasion the University sent him a letter of congratulation, begging him, as Chancellor, to obtain the confirmation of its privileges in Rome. He set the affairs of his see in order, under the care of the priors of his cathedral and of Ledes, in Kent. But a second time the commission was revoked. The third, and last, projected visit foundered because of a synod summoned by Cardinal Wolsey, who had lately been made legate and was supremely powerful in England. It was necessary that the Bishop of Rochester should be present; and so for the third time his great desire had to be sacrificed.

As Wolsey was believed to have been the chief opponent of St John's College, so he seems more than once to have been the means, consciously or unconsciously, of thwarting the holy Bishop, whose character and whole life were so eminently in contrast to his own. Yet, when his annual term of office expired in 1514, Fisher advised his University to elect Wolsey in his stead, as a measure of policy. The authorities reluctantly complied with his wish, ex-

pressing great admiration and affection in a letter to the Chancellor who had done so much for the cause of learning. Fisher replied that he had been able to do little, and hoped that Wolsey may do greater things. He added, that though he set little or rather no value on the mere honour of being Chancellor, he greatly esteemed the honour of being chosen to it by such a body; promising his help and his prayers that, as the University had lately grown in collegiate buildings . . . it might advance in learning and in virtue in Christ. However, Wolsey, who was at that time Bishop of Lincoln, declined on account of his cares of State, promising the University his friendship. Whereupon the University promptly elected John Fisher Chancellor for life.

When Wolsey was made Cardinal, there was a splendid ceremony at Westminster, in November, 1515, in which the Bishop of Rochester took part, as "crosier" to the Archbishop, Warham, who sang the Mass at the investiture in the presence of many bishops and abbots. Colet, Dean of St Paul's, the friend of Fisher, More, and Erasmus, preached the sermon, in which he observed that "a cardinal represented the order of seraphim, which continually

burneth in the love of the glorious Trinity, and for their consideration a cardinal is only apparelled with red, which colour betokeneth nobleness." What a contrast between the two friends of the King, both to be raised to the seraphic colour, both to die in the wrath of their King, yet for such opposite reasons!

Owing to the important position of his see, Bishop Fisher was involved in a vast amount of State pageantry; when this craze of the age, exceeding the fitness of necessity, became mere costly and vain show, he complained of the heavy expense and distraction from his work. Thus, in 1510, the Pope (who had sent a sword and cap of maintenance to Henry VII) sent the golden rose to Henry VIII. In 1514, the latter received the sword and cap from Leo X, and a splendid gold rose-tree from Clement VII in 1524.

In 1520, these duties of State led to John Fisher's first and last absence from England. In March of that year he was informed that, as Privy Councillor, he would ride with the King at the Field of Cloth of Gold, for the embracing of the two sovereigns; together with the Legate, Wolsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and

other dignitaries. Fisher himself was to have four chaplains and twenty attendants, including eight gentlemen. He had also to provide twelve horses to be transported in the royal train. The historic meeting took place on June 7, the Feast of Corpus Christi, celebrated with sumptuous ceremonies. On the Sunday within the octave, the Bishop of Rochester was one of the assistants at the Cardinal's Mass, attended by the Kings, Queens, and nobility of both countries.

The little city of Rochester was taxed to its utmost to make space for another superb scene when in May, 1522, the Emperor Charles V came to visit Henry VIII, who met him at Dover. Bishop Fisher took part in the ecclesiastical welcome accorded to the imperial guest at Canterbury; and the brilliant gathering spent the Sunday at Rochester, where the Bishop entertained them. Rochester had to contrive to accommodate the 2,000 imperial attendants, and half the nobility and prelacy of England, with their train.

John Fisher played an important part among his brethren in Convocation—the assembly of the clergy of the realm by royal authority for State business, as distinct from purely ecclesiastical synods He

made a notable speech at Wolsey's Legatine Council in 1518, which Father Bridgett describes as "the cry of agony of a soul zealous for God's glory and men's salvation." He spoke freely, from his heart, in this solely clerical assembly, reproving their unworthiness of life, worldliness of dress, and delicacy of fare; with discretion but fiery fervour, touching the magnificent Cardinal to the quick. For he did not hesitate to point out that such disorders arose from the example of the head, whose pomp he reproved fearlessly, reminding him that "it stood better with the modesty of such a high pastor as he was to eschew all worldly vanity, specially in this perilous time, and by humility to make himself conformable and like the image of God."

"Who can willingly suffer and bear with us," he cried, "in whom (preaching humility, sobriety, and contempt of the world) they may evidently perceive haughtiness in mind, pride in gesture, sumptuousness in apparel, and damnable excess in all worldly delicacies?"

But after he had said this and much more, though they all seemed by their silence to be much impressed, the sequel proved that

few were persuaded by his counsel, "so that (excuses never wanting to cover sin) this holy father's words, spoken with so good a zeal, were all lost and came to nothing for that time." But who shall say what good they eventually wrought in those who heard them?

But there were many excellent and learned prelates who strove earnestly to effect a genuine reformation, including Fisher's old friend, Bishop Fox of Winchester, who, on his retirement from Court, devoted himself to such reform in his own diocese. He wrote a grateful and congratulatory letter to Wolsey in 1527, when the Legate proposed to take strong action in a national council—a project wrecked by the affair of the royal divorce.

For the second time in his public life John Fisher had to oppose the King. This was in 1523, when Parliament assembled at Blackfriars with Sir Thomas More as Speaker, and the Southern Convocation met at St Paul's, when the Mass of the Holy Ghost was sung. Wolsey attempted to override this by summoning a Legatine Synod at Westminster, but this was soon dismissed, and the strife and confusion was resolved by that sovereign remedy for

political contentions in the good old Catholic days—the Mass of the Holy Ghost, three times sung. "I pray the Holy Ghost be among them and us both," wrote a member of the Parliament.

The question at issue was that of a large subsidy for the war with France. Though Sir Thomas More, as Speaker, strove to gain the King's desire, his friend, the Bishop of Rochester, freely maintained his own contrary view. He and Bishop Fox strenuously opposed the project of granting the King a moiety of one year's revenue of all benefices in England, to be levied in five years, but the proposal was carried.

Fisher's outspoken courage in braving the wrath of the King and the all-powerful Cardinal was significant. They wished to gain England an important share in European arbitration, but he, with genuine and clear-sighted patriotism, considered his country's highest good; and could not think that such an ambition "promoted the glory of God, or the protection of Christendom against the infidels, or the prosperity of England." And he was fearlessly faithful to his convictions, not guessing what greater tests awaited him in the coming years.

CHAPTER VII

DEFENDER OF HOLY MATRIMONY

JOHN FISHER had a special devotion to St John the Baptist, whose 'Head,' in effigy, was kept on the altar in the Broad Gallery at Rochester Palace, and placed before the Bishop while he said Mass. This devotion was to be put to a practical test, and proved by a trial remarkably like that of the saint himself. One cannot help wondering if the holy Bishop had some forewarning of what was now at hand.

In 1525, or thereabouts, he wrote in his defence of the King's book against Luther (when Henry had written words in honour of holy matrimony which are amazing from such an author): "One consideration that greatly affects me to believe in the sacrament of marriage is the martyrdom of St John the Baptist, who suffered death for his reproof of the violation of marriage. There were many crimes in appearance more grievous for rebuking which he might have suffered, but there was none more fit-

ting than the crime of adultery to be the cause of the blood-shedding of the Friend of the Bridegroom, since the violation of marriage is no little insult to him who is called the Bridegroom."

When this was written, Henry's much vaunted 'scruples' about his marriage had not yet developed, and "Anne Boleyn, Fisher's Herodias, was then unknown."[1] But Fisher, like his friend, Thomas More, lived so intimately in union with God by prayer and constant self-denial that his clear vision penetrated singularly far; they, indeed, fulfilled the command to 'watch and pray,' and when the time of trial came, they were prepared.

In the spring of 1527, the scheme of the royal divorce was bruited. Familiar as the outlines of that unedifying history are to most of us, there was, in fact, strictly speaking, never any question of 'divorce' at all; it was well known to Catholic Christendom that no such thing was possible. But the convenient term has come to be used, and sometimes abused by the enemies of the Church, among historians for so long that it is now almost unavoidable. A notable instance of this confusion may be seen in

[1] Bridgett.

Froude's *History*, in which he takes for granted the Pope's power to dissolve the marriage, had he willed to do so; and also confuses the matter further by assuming that the exceptional circumstances which influence royal marriages (and sometimes make dispensations desirable) may also apply to their dissolution. As if divorce were possible for rank and wealth though not for the rest of mankind; in which case England would have been Catholic yet. Whereas Henry himself, as Father Bridgett points out, laid down the Catholic principle; for it never occurred to him to claim a dissolution on grounds of pure statesmanship. Knowing this was impossible, he could only plead the invalidity from the beginning by denying the power of the Pope to dispense for such a marriage as his, and so asking Clement to correct the error of Julius; or pleading, not lack of power in the dispenser, but lack of force in the dispensation. "He could allege informalities, omission of necessary clauses, non-verification of clauses inserted, deceit and misrepresentation in the petitioners, error as to facts in the grantor. As a matter of fact he began by impugning the Bull of dispensation, and, failing in this, he ended

by impugning the power of the dispenser."[1]

It is a terrible fact that Cardinal Wolsey gave the King his complete and willing support in this dastardly attack on the defenceless and good Queen Catherine. While Henry was thus abusing the power and wealth of his kingdom, Wolsey, Cardinal, and Legate of the Holy See, the representative of the rights of justice in England, was aiding and abetting the King's base designs. Both alike practised the most appalling sanctimonious hypocrisy in treating of the matter. During the critical illness of the Pope (before the opening of the Legatine Court in England), Henry wrote to his agents in Rome plotting to have Wolsey elected should Clement VII die. "If the cardinals present, *having God and the Holy Ghost before them*, consider what is best for the Church, they cannot fail to agree upon Wolsey," he piously observes, adding scandalous promises of "spiritual promotions, offices, dignities, rewards of money and other things . . ." all this with Wolsey's connivance. And, again, in the royal declaration to the country explaining his motives for questioning his marriage, "*He*

[1] Bridgett.

called God to witness, and declared on the word of a king," that he was acting thus solely because he feared for the peace of England if he died without legitimate issue; and this objection had recently been raised when he was negotiating an alliance for his daughter—that his marriage with his deceased brother's widow was forbidden by God's law. He then adorns this solemn perjury with a description of his scruples, adding that "Should it clearly appear that he could continue in his present marriage, nothing would please him better." He saw fit to conclude with an invitation for prayers that "the truth might be made manifest."

The real truth was then well known—that he was already determined to marry Anne Boleyn, as is proved by his letters to her and his secret instructions to his agents.

To one man especially the whole case appeared very clearly in its true light. Bishop Fisher now fulfilled his friend Lady Margaret's dying wish by serving the King's best interests when very few had the courage to do so; he remained genuinely faithful to the King, fighting in the cause of justice with his own well-tried weapon, simple honesty.

The scheme agreed upon by Henry and Wolsey was initiated by the institution of a collusive suit brought against the King by the Legate, Wolsey, and Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, on May 17, 1527. It seems that the latter, who had not approved of the marriage originally, was led to believe in the good faith of the whole action. The King appeared to defend himself, while one of his own party pleaded against him, all the proceedings being secret.

After this solemn farce, the Archbishops referred the matter to several of England's most learned bishops, most of whom replied that a papal dispensation made such a marriage valid. Father Bridgett quotes John Fisher's letter to Wolsey, in which the Bishop declares that, having consulted all the "mute teachers" he could get into his hands, and "diligently sorted their opinions"—among which he found great divergence—and "After weighing impartially over and over again the reasons on both sides," he thinks he sees an easy reply to the argument that such a marriage is prohibited by divine law, but not to the contrary opinion.

"So that I am now thoroughly convinced

that it can by no means be proved to be prohibited by any divine law that is now in force. . . . If this is true, and I have no doubt that it is most certainly true, who can deny, considering the plenitude of power which Christ has conferred on the sovereign Pontiff, that the Pope may dispense, for some very grave reason, for such a marriage?"

Even if the reasons and difficulties on either side were evenly balanced, he would nevertheless incline to give the dispensing power to the Pontiff, "for this reason that the theologians of both sides grant that it belongs to the plenitude of the pontifical office to interpret ambiguous places of Holy Scripture, having heard the judgement of theologians and jurists. Otherwise to no purpose would Christ have said: 'Whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.' Now, as it is most evident that by their very acts the sovereign Pontiffs have more than once declared that it is lawful in the case mentioned to dispense in favour of the second brother, this alone would powerfully move me to give my assent, even if they alleged no reasons or proofs. From these premisses

no scruple or hesitation remains in my mind about the matter. I wish your eminence long life and happiness."

Having thus investigated the matter, Fisher knew his own mind once for all—though he continued to study the subject—and was prepared to go to all lengths in the defence of right against unprincipled might. This letter, written at Rochester in May, 1527, was forwarded by Wolsey to the King on June 2.

Rumours of the secret action now reached the Queen, who demanded an explanation from the King. He alleged torment of conscience lest he were living in mortal sin—a fear only too well grounded, but for other causes—and asserted that he only sought light and peace. In the meantime, would she not choose a separate residence until the verdict was given?

The outraged Queen refused to do this, demanding to be given counsel, both in England and elsewhere. Then Henry urged upon her the importance of keeping the matter secret. He and Wolsey wrongly supposed that Bishop Fisher had told her the evil news.

In July, Wolsey, on his way to France, visited the Bishop at Rochester; setting

out in his usual manner with a retinue of nine hundred horsemen and a throng of attendants. He slept one night under that hallowed roof, to practise his wiles upon the upright Fisher (whose spiritually refined perceptions probably probed his intentions); and he wrote a detailed report to his royal master, who, in the meantime, was engaged in trying secretly to outwit him by attempting to obtain his wish from the captive Pope by means of another envoy.

The Cardinal opened the conversation by discoursing of the troubles which oppressed the Church, the projects for the release of the Pope (taken captive after the sack of Rome by the imperial army), "as well in prayer and fasting as in other good deeds," added his Eminence suavely. Then he came to the point, for which the Bishop had doubtless been waiting.

"After which communication," he tells the King, "I asked him whether he had heard lately any tidings from the Court, and whether any man had been sent unto him from the Queen's Grace. At which question he somewhat stayed and paused; nevertheless, in conclusion he answered . . . that of late one was sent unto him

from the Queen's Grace, who brought him a message only by mouth . . . that certain matters there were between your Grace and her lately chanced, wherein she would be glad to have his counsel, alleging that your Highness was content she should so have. Whereunto, as he saith, he made answer likewise by mouth, that he was ready and prone to give her his counsel in anything that concerned and touched only herself; but in matters concerning your Highness and her, he would nothing do, without knowledge of your pleasure and express commandment, and herewith dismissed the messenger."

Having thus told the simple truth, which only served to prove his own discretion and utter loyalty to both the King and the Queen, Fisher met the next attack. The Cardinal now proceeded to appeal to a—presumed—long-standing friendship between himself and the holy Bishop.

"My lord," he said, "ye and I have been of an old acquaintance, and the one hath loved and trusted the other; wherefore, postponing all doubt and fear, ye may be frank and plain with me, like as I, for my part, will be with you."

With which gracious remark the Legate

"demanded of him whether he had any special conjecture or knowledge what the matter should be wherein the Queen desired to have his advice. Whereunto he answered, that by certain report and relation he knew nothing; howbeit, upon conjecture arising upon such things as he had heard, he thinketh it was for a divorce to be had between your Highness and the Queen."

The Bishop added that this was particularly due to "a tale brought unto him by his brother from London, who showed, that being there in a certain company, he heard say that things were set forth, sounding to such a purpose."

This, together with the question about a marriage with a deceased brother's widow recently submitted to him for judgement by Wolsey and Warham, and the message from the Queen, inclined him to believe that such must be the matter in hand.

"And this was all that he knoweth therein, as he constantly affirmeth; without that ever he sent any word or knowledge thereof, by his faith, to the Queen's Grace, or any other living person."

So far, Wolsey had not obtained much satisfaction. He next affected to become

deeply confidential, saying that the King had bidden him reveal his secret to Fisher under oath of secrecy, in order thus to obtain the Bishop's opinion.

". . . And thus declaring the whole matter unto him at length, *as was devised with your Highness in York Place,* I added that, by what means it was not yet apprehended, an inkling of this matter is come to the Queen's knowledge; who being suspicious, and casting further doubts than was meant or intended, hath broken with your Grace thereof, after a very displeasant manner, saying that by my procurement and setting forth, a divorce was purposed between her and your Highness."

Having thus exposed the essential truth of the case, Wolsey proceeded to try and damage the unfortunate Queen in her counsellor's eyes by representing her as prematurely publishing the affair, and so endangering her own daughter, whose legitimacy the King was merely endeavouring to establish beyond question. He assures the King that "my Lord of Rochester, hearing the process of the matter after this sort, did greatly blame the Queen"; even wishing to reason with her, "considering that the thing done by

your Grace was so necessary and expedient and the Queen's act so perilous. Howbeit I have so persuaded him that he will nothing do or speak therein, or anything counsel her, but as shall stand with your pleasure; for, he saith, although she be Queen for this realm, yet he acknowledgeth you for his high Sovereign Lord and King."

Thus cruelly was the unhappy Queen deprived of her valued counsellor, whose duty to both parties placed him in a most difficult position, aggravated by this net of lying intrigue. Yet he remained faithful to the King throughout, and at the same time proved himself a stanch friend to the persecuted Queen.

During the next fifteen months the Bishop had no active part to play in the matter; but he spent the time in prayer, study, and a vigilant watching of the case. Meantime, the royal spies were on the alert to see if he attempted to help the Queen. Doubtless he was thus preparing himself for the great trial that was to come, as was fairly evident.

As the affair proceeded, Henry became willing to go all lengths to obtain his desire. "Machiavelli would have turned with dis-

gust from so miserable a liar. Henry was a liar to his own conscience. He was a thoroughly immoral man, and he dared not own it to himself. He tried by all kinds of casuistic subterfuges to make his most dishonest acts appear pure virtue, to make himself believe in his own goodness."[1]

It remains an extraordinary tragedy that a King whose reign began with such splendid promise, whose Court knew such men as More and Fisher, whose own theological treatise had earned him the proud title of 'Defender of the Faith'—that such a man should degenerate into one of the most criminal tyrants the world has ever seen. Father Bridgett makes the striking comment that his downfall may be traced to the habit of making sacrilegious communions. Fear of the pestilence of 1528, known as the "sweating sickness," caused the King to part from Anne for a time; he went to confession and communion, and made his will. But, evidently anxious to make the best of both worlds, he did not interrupt the divorce proceedings, nor his correspondence with Anne. In later years, when his public life was a flagrant scandal, the Privy Purse accounts still record offer-

[1] Friedmann.

ings made at the royal communions on the greater festivals.

Then the papal Legate, Cardinal Campeggio, arrived in England during October, 1528. He began by attempting to recall the King to his existing alliance, offering in the Pope's name to grant a new dispensation as the former one was questioned. This was the last thing Henry desired, so he reiterated his doubts as to the papal power to give any such dispensation. Wolsey also attempted to influence the Cardinal. Then Campeggio interviewed the Queen, who pleaded that she was "a lone woman and a stranger, without friend or adviser, and intended to ask the King for counsellors."

As she would undoubtedly choose Fisher, the King now attempted to influence him through Cardinal Campeggio, hoping that the Queen might be persuaded to cut the knot by entering a religious Order—a thing she resolutely refused to do, with Fisher's approval.

"As the Bishop of Rochester is in her favour, and I believe she will choose him as one of her counsellors," writes the Legate, "with the King's consent, I had a long interview with him on the 25th

(October, 1528), and exhorted him to adopt this course for many reasons. When he left me he seemed to be satisfied with the course I had urged. God grant that the best counsels may prevail." Whether the Bishop thought differently after reconsidering the case, or whether the Cardinal misinterpreted him, he did not advocate the proposed course.

The counsellors given to the Queen were: the Archbishop of Canterbury (originally unfavourable to the marriage); the Bishops of Rochester, Bath (who could not be depended upon in this matter), and London (Tunstal, a distinguished, faithful, but not very strong character); her own confessor, Thomas Abel, who gave his life for the faith in 1540; Nicholas West, Bishop of Ely, an old friend of Fisher; and some others.

It was eight months before the Legatine Court met; a time which the Bishop of Rochester devoted to a further study of the question. A record of certain interrogations put to the Bishop, and his replies, exists among the State papers concerning his own trial in later years; from this we learn that he composed some seven or eight treatises on the subject, some of which were

printed abroad, though the author "never sent nor consented to the sending of any of these books over the sea. I never counselled Abel, or consented to the publishing of his book, neither had he any book of mine, to my knowledge."

Neither had the Bishop, on his own declaration, ever addressed the Queen in private, except when the King commanded him to advise her. The whole case was so serious, "both on account of the importance of the persons concerned, and on account of the injunction given me by the King, that I devoted more attention to examining the truth of it, lest I should deceive myself and others, than to anything else in my life."

The royal persecutor actually questioned the Bishop about certain letters of spiritual direction which he had written to the Queen, which had apparently been found, read, and used as weapons against her. Had she confessed to despair? Had she committed perjury?

"The King knows right well," answered Fisher, "that by his own consent the Lady Catherine sent for me more than once, on account of certain scruples of conscience, and that long before this business was begun. To allay her scruples, I used many

words *viva voce,* and afterwards wrote some letters. I never heard from her that she despaired of mercy or had committed perjury; but whatever I may have written, it was with the purpose that she should lay aside scruples and strengthen her mind in hope and confidence in the promises of Christ." Father Bridgett observes that the Queen's trust in Fisher was the cause of Henry's hatred of him, and compares the Bishop's constancy in this matter with that of such martyrs of the Sacrament of Penance as St John Nepomucen.

"From the day the question was mooted," he writes, "till the eve of Henry's marriage with Anne Boleyn he did not cease to defend the Queen's cause by his pen and in the pulpit."

Eventually, the Legatine Court was opened at Blackfriars in May, 1529; and on June 18 the King appeared by proxy, the Queen in person, to protest against the Court's jurisdiction. A few days later occurred the scene immortalised by Shakespeare, when the Queen knelt before Henry, seated under his canopy of gold brocade, and pleaded that she had lived twenty years as his lawful wife, and did not deserve to be repudiated and thus put to shame with-

out a cause, beseeching the judges to show her favour.

On June 22, "two bishops appeared as advocates and proctors for the Queen—namely, the Bishop of Rochester and the Bishop of Bath, saying that, to prevent the King falling into mortal sin, they would defend the rights of the Queen, and show that she was his legitimate and true wife; and they presented the writ of appeal, rejecting the judges as suspected, so that nothing further was done."

There was an argument in no uncertain terms when Fisher repudiated any share in a document bearing what was alleged to be his signature and seal, and declaring that he, with the other bishops, had been consulted by the King concerning the divorce, and that they considered that he had great reasons for his scruples.

He made it quite plain that he saw through the whole impious scheme of the proceedings, and we have Cardinal Campeggio's description of the Bishop's speech and its effect.

". . . The Bishop of Rochester made his appearance, and said, in an appropriate speech, that in a former audience he had heard the King's Majesty discuss the

cause, and testify before all that his only intention was to get justice done, and to relieve himself of the scruple that he had on his conscience, inviting both the judges and everyone else to throw some light on the investigation of the cause. . . . If, on this offer and command of the King, he (the Bishop) did not come forward in public and manifest what he had discovered in this matter after two years' most diligent study (he would be guilty). . . .

"Therefore, both in order not to procure the damnation of his own soul, and in order not to be unfaithful to the King, or to fail in doing the duty which he owed to the truth, in a matter of such great importance," he offered to "declare, to affirm, and with forcible reasons to demonstrate to them that this marriage of the King and Queen can be dissolved by no power, human or Divine, and for this opinion he declared he would even lay down his life."

Then came the words that startled the whole assembly and enraged the King:

"He added that the Baptist in olden times regarded it as impossible for him to die more gloriously than in the cause of marriage; and that as it was not so holy at that time as it has now become by the

shedding of Christ's Blood, he (the Bishop) could encourage himself more ardently, more effectually, and with greater confidence to dare any great or extreme peril whatever."

At the conclusion of his speech the Bishop presented a copy of one of the books he had written on the subject.

"This affair of Rochester was unexpected and unforeseen," concludes the Legate, "and consequently has kept everybody in wonder. What he will do we shall see when the day comes. You already know what sort of a man he is, and may imagine what is likely to happen."

The French ambassador, the Bishop of Bayonne, adds to our knowledge of the scene: "The Bishop of Rochester . . . who is accounted one of the best and most holy divines in England, especially in his opposition to these last heresies of Luther, was there with other counsellors, but not as (the Queen's) proctor, only to remonstrate with the judges, offering to prove that she had a good cause by a little book which he had made thereon jointly with his companions, which he then presented, enlarging upon the Queen's cause with many wise words. A rather modest answer was made

by the judges, that it was not his business to pronounce so decidedly in the matter, as the cause was not committed to him."

A Latin MS. still exists, composed by the indignant King in reply to this speech, annotated on the margin in the holy Bishop's own hand. As so often happens in such cases, Henry made his own infamy more conspicuous by calling attention anew to the striking comparison made by Fisher.

"What is the meaning of that comparison of his," he demands, "in which he endeavours to assimilate his own cause to that of John the Baptist, unless he held the opinion that I was acting like Herod, or attempting some outrage like that of Herod?"

Subsequent events provided an eloquent answer to this question. The studious Bishop was now forced into prominent and deadly controversy, driven by his duty to Church and State; he had prayed and pondered over the merits of the case till he was so convinced of the justice of the persecuted Queen's cause that he could have no shadow of doubt in the matter. And it was well known that no power could shake or silence him.

In July, the Pope revoked the Legatine powers and reserved the case to himself. The King, raging in his disappointment, visited his wrath on Wolsey, who had bartered his own soul to gain Henry's ends. By October the once all-powerful Minister was no longer Chancellor, and a writ of Præmunire stood against him; a charge of treason threatened, and might have proved fatal. His many enemies were only too ready to press the accusations brought against him, and all his magnificence was reduced to actual poverty. And the Chancellor chosen in his stead was Sir Thomas More. The Imperial envoy, Chapuys, wrote: "Everyone is delighted at his promotion, because he is an upright and learned man, and a good servant of the Queen." Sir Thomas, however, had no illusions about the dangerous honour. Though, after a careful study of the problem of the day, he could not support the King's contention, such was his personal charm that he still retained the royal favour. His friend, Bishop Fisher, continued to watch the course of events, championing the cause of justice by every means in his power.

In November, 1529, Sir Thomas opened the Long Parliament, in which the Com-

mons were carefully 'packed' in order that the King might carry out his plans for revenging himself on the clergy, who, as a body, had opposed the divorce.

As a spiritual peer and a member of Convocation, this directly concerned the Bishop of Rochester. The Commons presented to the King a Bill complaining of the exactions and other abuses practised by the clergy—a preconcerted measure drawn up by the Crown lawyers before Parliament met—and this was sent to the Bishops. The measure was a distinct attack on the powers of the Church; needless to say, Bishop Fisher stoutly defended her rights in a speech which was approved by many of the clergy and some of the laity, though others feared the King's displeasure. The Commons resented it so much that they complained to the King, through the Speaker, Audley. To satisfy them, Henry questioned the Bishop, who answered that, "being in council, he spake his mind in defence and right of the Church, whom he saw daily injured and oppressed among the common people, whose office was not to deal with her," and he therefore felt bound to defend her.

The King used this measure as a means

of sowing dissension between clergy, bishops, and laity. "The lords spiritual, by their majority in the Upper House, rejected the Bills; the Commons insisted on pressing them. The King suggested a conference in Star Chamber of eight members from each House. The lay lords on the committee voted with the Commons, and by this contrivance the Bill was passed."[1]

Foreign despatches reveal the fact that Fisher was as resolute and resourceful even then as he had proved himself in the struggle for St John's in earlier days. He, together with his brethren of Bath and Ely, appealed to Rome against the law that no one in the kingdom should hold more than one ecclesiastical benefice—an obvious infringement of ecclesiastical rights and jurisdiction. The three bishops—who, it was noted, were all friends of the Queen's cause—were arrested by order of the infuriated King. The details are obscure, but, at all events, the Bishop took his usual vigorous part in Convocation some months later. Parliament was prorogued in December, and a committee of Convocation was

[1] Dr. Stubbs' *Lectures on Mediæval and Modern History.*

chosen to report on the complaint concerning heretical books which was contained in the Commons' Bill. The result was a royal proclamation announcing the enforcement of all existing laws against such propaganda.

In 1530, Wolsey's enemies succeeded in having him charged with high treason; and during his journey to London, he died at Leicester Abbey with the famous words, "If I had served my God as I have served my King, he would not have given me over in my grey hairs."

CHAPTER VIII

FAITHFUL AMONG THE FAITHLESS

HENRY'S lust for power was now getting beyond control; and he had declared war on the clergy. His few utterly faithful Ministers were now put to the most searching test, which could only be survived by men of prayer. "Let those who pray stand apart," said a modern tyrant when he was about to send the martyrs of Uganda to their death. That quality has distinguished the faithful minority—and especially the martyrs—of all ages. Two notable men of prayer, John Fisher and his friend Thomas More, now stood apart, above the servile crowd with which they had to deal; clear-sighted and sick at heart as they saw the approaching disaster which was about to overwhelm Catholic England, they remained unflinching to the end.

Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, was a fair representative of the majority of the more worthy among the clergy of his flock; a good and learned man, upright and kindly, but no great fighter. "The anger

of a king is death to a man," was his favourite saying. But when the Duke of Norfolk quoted this to Sir Thomas More, it was answered by the true martyr-spirit, "Is that all, my lord?" and the shrewd comment, "Then in good faith the difference between your grace and me is but this, that I shall die to-day and you to-morrow.'

The King now tried his hand, as it were, at openly bullying the clergy, convicting them in a body under the Statute of Præmunire for acknowledging the Legatine authority—an offence of which the entire realm was guilty. The result must have astonished even Henry himself.

Instead of making a firm stand at the outset, and authoritatively asserting the rights of the Church against such royal encroachments, the clergy voluntarily offered to purchase pardon by an enormous gift of money, to raise which it would be necessary to sell their chalices and reliquaries. "Though the clergy knew themselves innocent," wrote Chapuys to the Emperor, "seeing that it was determined to find fault with them, they offered of their own accord 160,000 ducats."

Swift to follow up his advantage, the

King promptly refused to accept less than 400,000, under pain of punishment with "extreme rigour."

When, a few days later, the Papal Nuncio and the Imperial envoy agreed that the former should advise Convocation to support the immunity of the Church, and to "inform themselves about the Queen's affair," showing them the Pope's letters on the subject, and "offering to intercede for them with the King about the gift with which he wishes to charge them," they did not so much as give him a hearing. As soon as he appeared they "begged him to leave them in peace, for they had not the King's leave to speak with him, and if he came to execute any Apostolic mandate, he ought to address himself to the Archbishop of Canterbury."

Unedifying as such records are, they help us to understand how it was possible for Henry to wrench England from the Church as he did with such comparative ease. This extraordinary servility of the clergy may partly be accounted for by the rumour zealously circulated by royal agency that the Pope intended to give judgement in favour of the King.

But John Fisher was not to be daunted

even by that possibility. "The Bishop of Rochester lately sent to me," writes Chapuys, "to say that the King had made new attempts to suborn him and others who hold for the Queen, telling him many follies and falsehoods," and, at his request, the envoy explained the truth of some of these canards to Bishop Fisher. The King questioned the Bishop about this interview next day.

Dr. Hall describes the significant project mooted in Convocation in those early days —no less than the suppression of small monasteries to pay the expenses incurred in the negotiation for the royal divorce; and gives us the interesting information that the Bishop of Rochester was responsible for the postponement of the scheme.

Having thus intimidated the clergy, Henry now proceeded to make "a new and strange demand . . . such a one as hath not in any Christian prince's days been heard of before; and that was, that they should acknowledge the King to be their supreme head."

This caused a tremendous stir in Convocation, some being ready to give way to the King, and others being intimidated by their example to withhold their opinions.

At this critical juncture, Fisher once again threw himself into the breach, and succeeded in staving off the impending capitulation for the time.

When the King heard this, and saw that all Convocation depended upon this worthy Bishop, he summoned several bishops to Westminster; and endeavoured to blind them with fair-sounding promises "in the word of a King"—a somewhat unfortunate argument to use after recent events.

The bishops left discussing the matter with heavy hearts; for my Lord of Rochester, always freely outspoken in defence of the Church—while many others feared the King's displeasure, though they were wise, learned men—had made the issue clear.

Henry continued to press the matter by means of his counsellors; having a deeper motive, destined to ruin Catholic England. At last the majority began to give way, except the steadfast Bishop of Rochester, "who utterly refused," and urged the rest to beware of the danger to "the whole Church of Christ by this unreasonable and unseemly grant made to a temporal prince, which never yet to this day was once so much as demanded before, neither can it

by any means or reason be in the power or rule of any temporal potentate."

Then he warned them of what actually came to pass, in terms which are almost prophetic. If they yield to the King now—"What if he should shortly after change his mind, and exercise indeed the supremacy over the Church of this realm? Or what if he should die, and then his successor challenge continuance of the same? Or what if the crown of this realm should in time fall to an infant or a woman that shall still continue and take the same name upon them? What shall we then do?"

The royal counsellors argued against this startling speech, and disputed with the bishops concerning royal authority over the clergy; but they were soon silenced by Fisher, before whom they were but simple smatterers in divinity, and departed in great anger.

Here was the type of contest for which the promising north-country lad of earlier years had been trained in the halls and divinity schools of Cambridge in the old orthodox days. He was now making full use of his learning to defend the rights of the Church in England in her hour of need. When, after days of hot argument, timorous

counsel prevailed, and the assembly decided to "condescend to the King's demand that he should be supreme head of the Church of England, and to credit his princely word so faithfully and solemnly promised unto them," then the good Bishop rose in righteous wrath and rebuked their weakness. But, seeing them determined to give way through fear, he induced them to include the saving clause, "So far as God's law permits." This, at least, all the angry protests of the royal counsellors could not prevent; the clergy stoutly refused to grant the title without it. This was on February 11, 1531. The address presented to Henry describes their money-offering as an expression of gratitude for his zeal against Lutheran heresy and in putting down insults to the clergy!

The attitude adopted by the Northern Convocation shows the wisdom of Fisher and Lady Margaret in stipulating for a strong northern element in the colleges they founded. The Bishop of Durham refused his consent to the new title, and also demanded to have his protest recorded in the Acts. Without alleging an attack on papal supremacy, he complained of ambiguity, which would be taken advantage of by

heretics, and desired that the acknowledgement of the "King's supreme headship should be so carefully expressed as to point wholly upon civil and secular jurisdiction."

Thus, without tampering with papal supremacy as yet, the King prepared the way lest the decision of Rome should go against him. All blamed this usurpation, except those who had promoted it. "The Chancellor (More) is so mortified at it that he is anxious above all things to resign his office. The Bishop of Rochester is very ill with disappointment at it. He opposes it as much as he can; but being threatened that he and his adherents should be thrown in the river, he was forced to consent to the King's will."[1] The clergy of both provinces sent the King vigorous protests against the new encroachment, one being headed by Fisher's great friend, Peter Ligham, and signed by his archdeacon, Nicholas Metcalf, the devoted Master of St John's College, Cambridge, and other clergy of the Diocese of Rochester.

A very short time after the dispute in Convocation, the Bishop of Rochester's life was twice endangered by mysterious means. On February 18, some pottage was

[1] Chapuys.

served in his house at Lambeth, and shared by most of his servants, but fortunately not by the Bishop himself. All who tasted it were severely poisoned, and two died. The King, calling the attention of the House of Lords to this mystery, informed them that the cook was immediately seized, at the instance of the Bishop's brother; and, it is said, confessed he had thrown in a powder, which, he had been given to understand, would only hocus the servants without doing them any harm.

Chapuys observed that the King, though he had done well to show dissatisfaction at this, could not wholly avoid some suspicion, if not against himself, "at least against the lady and her father"—that is, Anne Boleyn. Fisher, though very ill, was resolved to leave London; Chapuys knows not why, "especially as he will get better attendance of physicians here than elsewhere, unless it be that he will no longer be a witness of things done against the Church, or that he fears there is some more powder in reserve for him."

A special Act of Parliament was passed to deal with the case, in language really worthy of Henry VIII. It declared that the King's royal majesty, having most tender

zeal to the making and enforcing of good laws, especially "that man's life above all things is chiefly to be favoured, and voluntary murders most highly to be detested and abhorred," etc., and how, on "the 18th day of February, in the twenty-second year of his most victorious reign one Richard Roose, late of Rochester in the county of Kent, cook" (which seems rather an anti-climax to so ponderous a preamble!) ". . . of his most damnable and wicked disposition, did cast a certain venom of poison" into what is awesomely described as "a vessel replenished with yeast or barm, standing in the kitchen of the reverend Father in God, John, Bishop of Rochester," did, briefly, poison several people. "Our said sovereign lord the King, of his most blessed disposition inwardly abhorring all such damnable offences," condemns the said Richard Roose for—high treason!

The sequel is thus tersely described in the *Grey Friars' Chronicle*. "This year was a cook boiled in a cauldron in Smithfield, for he would have poisoned the Bishop of Rochester, Fisher, with divers of his servants, and he was locked in a chain, and pulled up and down with a gibbet at divers times till he was dead."

Soon after this, a gun was fired at the top of the Bishop's house at Lambeth, not far from the study, where his lordship "accustomably used to sit, which made such a horrible noise over his head, and bruised the tiles and rafters of the house so sore, that both he and divers others of his servants were suddenly amazed thereat," to quote Dr. Hall's mild description of the outrage. The shot was traced to a house across the river, belonging to Anne Boleyn's father. Whereupon the Bishop called his servants and said: "Let us truss up our gear, and be gone from hence; for here is no place for us to tarry any longer;" and so he immediately returned to Rochester.

There the Bishop resumed his former holy, severe life; labouring to reclaim heretics. Before the next session of Parliament, 'the lady,' as Anne Boleyn is termed at that time, sent to urge the Bishop, whom she feared more than anyone, "to forbear coming to this Parliament, that he may not catch any sickness, as he did last year; but it is of no use, for he is resolved to come and speak more boldly than he has ever done, should he die a hundred thousand times."

The fight had begun in good earnest

now. The Bishop, who was now past sixty, and worn with labours, fastings, and ill-health, shouldered this desperate burden of care manfully, and went to London as usual when Parliament opened. "Intending," we learn from Chapuys, "to tell the King the plain truth about the divorce, and speak without disguise." As soon as the King heard of Fisher's arrival, he sent word he was very glad at his coming, and had many important things to say to him. The Bishop, fearing lest this should be an attempt to silence him, seized the moment when the King was going to Mass, attended by the gentlemen of his household, to make his reverence and present his respects—thus hoping to avoid the communication. The King received him more graciously than ever before, deferring the conversation till after the Mass; but Fisher prudently retired before the Mass was over. He afterwards told Chapuys he offered his "unconditional services in this affair of the Queen, requesting me at the same time not to write about him, or mention him in my despatches unless it be in cypher."

The meagre records in existence tell us little of John Fisher's action in this Parliament. He appears to have been ill again; but he

was consulted by the clergy when the King made further attacks on the legislative privileges of the Church. At this news, Henry sent for the Speaker, and complained that they were "only half his subjects." Whatever Fisher's reply may have been, the clergy agreed not to legislate in future except with royal assent. Though they tried to limit this to Henry's lifetime, the Act passed by Convocation on May 15, 1532, was justly known as the 'Submission of the Clergy.' Two years later it was incorporated in an Act of Parliament without any of its limitations. Needless to say, Fisher does not appear as having any part in this betrayal of ecclesiastical rights.

Meantime, Parliament passed an Act refusing the Annates, or firstfruits, due to the Holy See, schismatical in that "should the Pope refuse to grant Bulls on these new terms, or pursue his claim by spiritual censures, these were to be despised, the consecrations were to be made by the Archbishop, and spiritual functions exercised, without any regard to the Holy See. Still there was no repudiation of the supremacy of the Church of Rome."[1]

[1] Bridgett, p. 223.

John Fisher remarked to the Imperial Ambassador in February that the King's efforts to persuade his opponents that the Pope was favourable to the divorce had served to intimidate and perplex the Queen's partisans. But the Bishop himself championed the truth in a public sermon which silenced those who spoke in the King's favour, though the Queen's treatment was not improved.

Sir Thomas More had resigned the Chancellorship when he saw the trend of events, yielding up the Great Seal to the King in the gardens of York Place, by Westminster, one afternoon in May, 1532. In August, Archbishop Warham died, and Cranmer was nominated to succeed him. Another dangerously significant Act was passed—despite Fisher's opposition—against appeals to Rome in certain legislative matters. Though the three bishops who acted for the Queen were 'excused' from the Parliament which reassembled in February, 1533, and proctors appointed by the King, the indomitable Bishop of Rochester attended as usual.

On January 25 of that year, Henry had gone through a form of marriage with Anne Boleyn, though the cause was still pending

in Rome; "but to render Anne's expected issue legitimate, it was necessary to hasten proceedings to get a legal declaration that, his former marriage having been null, he had been free to marry. For this purpose the willing judge had been chosen in the person of Cranmer."[1]

The new Archbishop was consecrated in March and assembled Convocation. The King urged the settlement of his affair, "so that those present could scarcely eat or drink, and using such terms to them that no one dared open his mouth to contradict, except the good Bishop of Rochester. But his single voice cannot avail against the majority, so that the Queen and he now consider her cause desperate."

And so indeed it proved, for her most steadfast defender was forcibly silenced. On April 6, Palm Sunday, the King imprisoned the Bishop of Rochester, under charge of the Bishop of Winchester; which was accounted very strange, he being the most holy and learned prelate in Christendom. The real cause was "his manly defence of the Queen's cause."

In the preceding week Parliament declared the marriage with Queen Catherine

[1] Bridgett, p. 225.

null, and that consequently the King was free to marry. They also abolished the appeal to the Pope, prohibiting obedience to "papal monitions and interdicts. The Bishop of Rochester, having publicly opposed these measures, was arrested on Palm Sunday," adds the Venetian Ambassador.

On June 1, Cranmer desecrated the Feast of Pentecost by crowning Anne Boleyn; Fisher's episcopal gaoler, Gardiner, being one of the two bishops who assisted. Shortly afterwards the Pope annulled Cranmer's proceedings, and published a brief of censure against the King and Anne. On June 13, Fisher was released, and went back to Rochester.

In the December of that year, 1533, Bishop Fisher had a severe illness. About the same time a new attack was made upon him. This took the form of a determination to involve him in the accusations brought by Cromwell against the nun, Elizabeth Barton, known as the 'Holy Maid of Kent.'[1] Whatever the truth about her might be, the fact that the Bishop of Rochester was one of those who had had dealings with her

[1] See *Dame Elizabeth Barton, O.S.B., The Holy Maid of Kent*, by Rev. J. R. McKee (Burns Oates and Washbourne).

was counted sufficient excuse to include his name in the bill of attainder against her and her partisans, which Cromwell was preparing. This was also used as a convenient means of levying huge fines, by which the accused were to purchase pardon. But, ill as he was, Bishop Fisher flatly refused to apologise or pay, seeing that he was entirely guiltless of any offence, and had merely tested the genuineness of the nun's revelations. The Bill was introduced when Parliament met at the beginning of 1534; the Bishop was still too ill to attend, but he wrote a letter to the King in which the following striking passage occurs: "Now, my body is much weakened with many diseases and infirmities, and my soul is much inquieted by this trouble, so that my heart is more withdrawn from God and from the devotion of prayer, than I would. And verily, I think that my life may not long continue. Wherefore, eftsoons, I beseech your most gracious highness, that by your charitable goodness I may be delivered of this business, and only to prepare my soul to God, and to make it ready against the coming of death, and no more to come abroad in the world."

John Fisher, the persecuted Queen's

steadfast champion, was under attainder and his goods confiscated, when, in March, came the announcement that the Pope had finally decreed the validity of Henry's marriage to Catherine.

So far from receiving any mercy, the ailing Bishop, who had served the King, and his father before him, long and devotedly, was now called upon to take the Oath of Succession in favour of the issue of Henry's marriage with Anne, excluding the lawful successor to the crown, Princess Mary.

Shortly after the last Easter he was to celebrate in his beloved diocese, the Bishop recovered sufficiently to travel to London, where he had been summoned before the Commissioners. He was well prepared for the news, but it spread consternation among his household and friends. He quietly settled his affairs—with a remembrance of his old college, Michaelhouse, to which he bequeathed £100—and gifts for his poor. The sorrowing people flocked in from the countryside to take leave of their beloved Father, weeping and wailing aloud as he rode by, bareheaded and blessing them as he went. They cried out upon the wickedness of the times, they knew they would

never see him again, and bitterly blamed his enemies who had done this evil thing.

Some twenty miles beyond the city, the Bishop dismounted on the summit of Shooter's Hill, and lunched there; then he rode on to London, no doubt to his own house at Lambeth.

On April 13 he appeared before the Commissioners, and asked for a few days in which to consider the Oath. During this time, many of his friends visited him, including some from Cambridge, asking his confirmation of Cranmer's revision of the statutes of St John's, a thing the Bishop would not do without studying the matter, which was then impossible.

Having duly considered the Oath, Fisher informed the Commissioners that he could by no means accept it as it stood; nevertheless, he would swear to some part of it, "so that myself may frame it with other conditions . . . so that both my own conscience shall be thereby satisfied and His Majesty's doings the better justified and warranted by law." But no such exceptions would be tolerated; the Bishop must either answer "Yes" or "No."

"Then," he answered, "if you will needs have me answer directly, my answer is, that

forasmuch as mine own conscience cannot be satisfied, I do absolutely refuse the Oath." And thereupon he was sent straight to the Tower of London. Four days later his friend Sir Thomas More followed him there, for the same good cause.

CHAPTER IX

THE SUPREME TEST

THE aging and suffering Bishop now entered upon the hardest stage of his long life of great labours. For over a year he remained unswervingly faithful in the midst of the most searching hardships—cold, damp, loneliness, poverty, deprivation of all comfort, monotonous confinement, and, worst of all, cut off from the consolations of the Faith. All his goods were confiscated by the royal commissioners sent to Rochester to seize his goods. His beloved library, so industriously collected for St John's College, was looted and scattered, together with his plate, money, and gifts from Lady Margaret. His secret chest, rifled in search of money, was found to contain a hair-shirt and some well-used disciplines.

Nor was he left in such peace as the Tower afforded. Lee, the King's chaplain, visited him in a vain attempt to weaken his constancy; his subsequent letter to Cromwell reveals the pitiable condition of the holy Bishop. Worn out with work, fasting,

and penances, he was so wasted that he could scarcely bear the clothes on his back. But Henry was entirely without mercy, and the Oath was again administered to him a month after his imprisonment. Once more he refused it.

We can still see the Bell Tower in which he spent those long months, with its thick walls, flagged floor, and the window from which he watched the Carthusians pass by on their way to Tyburn. His terrible sufferings in that dank upper room are evident from the pathetic letter he wrote to Cromwell just before his last Christmas on earth. He dreads writing to the King, lest he should displease him further; but he will do so if it is desirable. He reminds Cromwell that he had offered to take that part of the Oath which concerned the Succession only, though he refused that which his conscience could not accept.

"Furthermore, I byseche yow to be gode master unto me in my necessite; for I have neither shirt nor sute, nor yett other clothes, that ar necessary for me to wear, but that bee ragged and rent to shamefuily. Notwithstanding I might easily suffer that, if thei wold keep my body warm. But my dyett allso, God knoweth how slendar it is

at meny tymes, and noo in myn age my sthomak may nott awaye but with a few kynd of meates, which if I want I decay forthwith, and fall into coafes (coughs) and diseases of my bodye, and kan not keep myself in health. And ass our Lord knoweth, I have nothyng laft unto me for to provide any better, but ass my brother of his own purs layeth out for me to his great hynderance. Wherefoor, gode master secretarye, eftsoons I byseche you to have sum pittee uppon me, and latt me have such thynges ass ar necessary for me in myn age, and specially for my health."

Between the lines of this tragic letter one sees the strong, faithful spirit nigh fainting in the broken, tortured body; it is the depth of winter, and the festive season is at hand, and this cry for mercy comes from the depths of his misery and weakness. Knowing as we do that he endured to the end, swerving not an inch despite his sufferings, there is something immensely consoling to our frailty in this glimpse of a heroic man's plea for some relief in his exhaustion. He begs Cromwell's good offices with the King that he may be liberated "out of this cold and paynefull emprysonment." He also asks for a priest, and for some books "to styr

my devotion mor effectuelly thes hooly dayes for the comforth of my sowl." He ends, with pathetic courtesy :

"And thus our Lord send you a mery Christenmass and a comforthable to your harts desyr. At the Tour, the 22d day of December. Yo pore Beadsman, Jo. Roffs."

Cardinal Pole has described the saintly old man's pitiable condition, the care needed to preserve that frail life, even in his own house, and how the prisoner fainted from weakness on the journey to London.

Another grief was added to the Bishop's burden when his devoted brother, who had supported him in prison at his own cost, died in the spring of 1535. His friends did not forget him in his time of trial; Erasmus wrote to him, and so did his beloved college, St John's—they also sent with the letter a deputation consisting of his old friend Dr. Metcalf, the Master, and some of the Fellows. They did all they could to comfort him, "more because they are ashamed to be silent, than because they know what is fit for them to say . . . whatever wealth they had in common, if they could spend it all in his cause, they should not yet equal his beneficence to them, but they entreat him to use whatever is theirs as his own."

Apparently they were as good as their word —though the Bishop's grief must have been great when the whole University took the oath, in fear of the King. But St John's set a shining example of gratitude which must have consoled their devoted patron.

Among the friends who assisted him was More's great friend, Bonvisi, a Florentine merchant, who sent wine and jellies to the prisoner daily for some time. He did the same for Sir Thomas, who exchanged a share of such gifts with his friend Fisher. Bonvisi also consulted a physician on the Bishop's behalf—Clements, another of More's friends. Though they shared the same prison, More and Fisher appear to have been kept entirely separate, able only to exchange messages and little gifts.

But in February, 1535, the Bishop fell seriously ill, and was attended by the royal physician. It is terrible to think of the prolonged agony he endured all those months, suffering as he was from "wasted liver," dropsy, general exhaustion, and the privations of cold and poverty. And in his time of need he was not allowed either to say or to hear Mass. Only two books were left to him, his New Testament and breviary; for a time he had writing materials, and

composed three books. One, *A Spiritual Consolation,* was for his Dominican sister at Dartford; so also was *The Ways of Perfect Religion.* The third of these works was on the *Necessity of Prayer.*

John Fisher's own nun-sister was among the vast majority who took the Oath of Supremacy; so were the clergy of his diocese. Ill news like this must have added terribly to his sufferings, alone with thought as he was. Henry coerced the already weakened bishops, and instituted a campaign of preaching against the papacy. His rule was fast becoming blindly tyrannical, and only the sturdy minority attempted to resist it. For long Fisher had preached the principles of truth in his spoken and written words; he was now driving home the lesson of loyalty to right against might by the powerful force of his example. In vain were the cowed bishops sent to argue with him; unmoved, he expostulated with them for betraying the cause they were bound to defend, so that one at least (Stokesley) afterwards repented bitterly of his part in the reluctant deputation.

In November, 1534, Bishop Fisher was again attainted of misprision of treason; in the same month Parliament declared Henry

to be Supreme Head of the Church in England, making it treasonable to refuse him this title. When this news was brought to the Bishop, he exclaimed, "Is it so?" and blessed himself, as though he foresaw what this would mean to him ere long. It is remarkable how often both he and his friend Sir Thomas More showed what was very like a prophetic foresight. Instances of this might be multiplied in both lives.

The Carthusians, who had also been imprisoned in the Tower, went to their martyrdom on May 4, 1535; Fisher saw them pass by, and so did his friend Sir Thomas as he stood at his own window with his beloved daughter Meg, watching them "as cheerfully going to their deaths as bridegrooms to their marriage." Afterwards a servant brought the Bishop some scrolls found in their cells, and he reported that Fisher looked at them and said, "They be gone; God have mercy on their souls." His own turn was soon to come, and their example must have strengthened him for the last trial.

Shortly after this, he received a visit from the Council; the King desiring to force an issue, though the Bishop had remained silent in his protest against the Oath. A second visit proved as fruitless as the first;

but the correspondence between Fisher and his friend and fellow-sufferer, Sir Thomas More, was intercepted, and a great questioning ensued. The letters were few, and, as Sir Thomas himself declared, contained "for the most part nothing but comfortable words and thanks for meat and drink sent by one to the other." But after the visits of the Council, the matter of the Oath was touched upon; following upon the final examination, he wrote that "he could only reckon on the uttermost and desired Fisher to pray for him, as he would for Fisher."

CHAPTER X

THE CROWN OF MARTYRDOM

JOHN FISHER was now to receive the two highest honours of his earthly career. On May 20 he was created Cardinal by Pope Paul III, "on account of his fame for virtue and learning"; and the Pontiff did all he could to obtain the holy prisoner's liberation by the influence of the French King. But the Imperial Ambassador in Rome wrote that he thought, before Fisher should have heard of it, "our Lord will have given him the true red hat, the crown of martyrdom." That was precisely the effect of the news when it reached England; Henry's notorious boast that when the hat came "he shall wear it on his shoulders, for head he shall have none to set it on," was followed by another summons to the two illustrious prisoners to take the Oath of Supremacy, otherwise they should be executed as traitors before St John's Day.

They remained constant as ever; and the King prepared public opinion for what was to come by instituting a campaign of

preaching against them. He also attempted to produce evidence that Fisher had sought the honour for himself—a grotesque supposition to anyone who knew him. We have the Bishop's own testimony that he heard the news through Margaret Roper, the favourite daughter of his friend, Sir Thomas More. So far as the mere honour was concerned, he said that if the Cardinal's hat were laid at his feet, he would not stoop to pick it up; but in another respect he would receive it upon his knees, as a means to work for the Church of Christ, and the honour of the Sovereign Pontiff.

On June 1, a special commission was appointed for the trial of the new Cardinal. He was again questioned in the Tower, but his cautious answers afforded no such evidence as desired. So on June 17 he was taken to Westminster Hall.

The first public appearance of the new Cardinal was a tragic yet glorious progress. He was so weak from his recent severe illness that the short journey exhausted him till he was at the point of death. Unable to walk, he rode part of the way on horseback, in his plain black cloth gown; the rest of the way he went by water, surrounded by a vast guard of halberds, bills, and other

weapons. The Tower axe was carried before him, according to custom—striking symbol for the martyr-Cardinal going to his trial.

Once before the assembly, he was called upon to hold up his hand, which he did with a most cheerful countenance and rare constancy. Then the long-winded indictment was read; the essence of it being that he refused to acknowledge the King as Supreme Head of the Church.

The law was outrageously adapted to suit the King's wishes throughout the Bishop's arraignment. The indictment falsely accused him of having denied the King's new title before several persons, in the Tower, on May 7—the occasion of the visit of the Council, when he had been most careful not to give any answer such as they obviously desired.

The unscrupulous Rich, Solicitor-General, as witness for the Crown, gave false evidence, based on a secret interview he, as the King's messenger, had had with the Bishop in the Tower. He now brazenly declared that he had then heard the prisoner say plainly "That he believed in his conscience, and by his learning assuredly knew, that the King neither was, nor by

right could be, Supreme Head in earth of the Church of England."

Amazed at this betrayal and travesty of the private interview sought in the King's name, Fisher exclaimed:

"Mr. Rich, I cannot but marvel to hear you come in and bear witness against me of these words, knowing in what secret manner you came to me." And he asked patience that he might himself be heard on the subject. He then related that this man came to him as from the King, on a secret message from Henry couched in flattering terms. This was to the effect that, though all the bishops, except himself, and the whole of Parliament, with very few exceptions, had consented to the Supremacy, yet the King, "for better satisfaction of his own conscience," desired his full opinion in the matter, "for the great affiance" he had in him more than any other.

It was characteristic of Henry's solemn effrontery to send such a message to the man his treatment during the past year had brought to the verge of death. But the trap was infamously baited. "He added further that if I would frankly and freely herein advise His Majesty of my knowledge, that upon certificate of my misliking, he was

very like to retract much of his former doings, and make satisfaction for the same in case I should so advise him."

The Bishop's opinion of Henry's conduct had long been sufficiently obvious to all Europe, and, suspecting new danger, he reminded the messenger of the grave risk involved in any discussion of the new Act. The answer was given with Henry's ominous pledge, "on his honour, and on the word of a king," that whatever he said to this messenger, he should abide no danger, nor should any advantage be taken of it. The messenger added his own promise to repeat the Bishop's answer to no living man except the King himself.

"Now, therefore, my lords," concluded the prisoner, "seeing it pleased the King's Majesty to send me word thus secretly, under the pretence of plain and true meaning, to know my poor advice . . . (which I most gladly was and ever will be willing to send him), methink it is very hard injustice to hear the messenger's accusation, and to allow the same as a sufficient testimony against me in case of treason."

But, as might be expected, the messenger was quite shameless, and, avoiding a direct answer, replied that whatsoever he had said

on the King's behalf, he said no more than His Majesty commanded him. In any case, how did that excuse the prisoner for having so directly spoken against the statute? The judges seized upon this point, saying that in so declaring his mind, "yea, though it were at the King's own commandment or request, he committed treason by the statute, and nothing can discharge him from death but the King's pardon."

Seeing that it was hopeless to expect justice, the Bishop protested to them that "by all equity, justice, worldly honesty, and courteous dealing, I cannot (as the case standeth) be directly charged therewith as with treason." And this not even if he had spoken the alleged words, not "maliciously," to quote the statute, but merely by way of advice and counsel at the King's own request, since the Act only affected "malicious" refusal.

They replied that the word was a superfluous one, as if a man spoke against the Supremacy by any manner of means, it was to be "understanded" and taken in law as maliciously. This the Bishop declared to be a hard exposition of the law, and contrary to the meaning of those who made it.

"But then, let me demand this question,

Whether a single testimony of one man may be admitted as sufficient to prove me guilty of treason for speaking these words or no, and whether my answer negatively may not be accepted against his affirmative to my avail and benefit or no?"

They answered that the jury would decide upon the evidence before them. But before they withdrew to consider their verdict, the Lord Chancellor so impressed upon them the heinous nature of the case, and the "dangerous treason" of it, that they saw plainly what the consequences would be to themselves if they dared to return a favourable verdict.

Some of the Commissioners accused the Cardinal of obstinacy and singularity in his indomitable opposition to the Oath, which they called presumptuous in one man against the rest of the bishops and Parliament. He answered that if it were so he might well be accounted singular, but he had on his side the rest of the bishops of Christendom, far outnumbering those of England, and he had all those of the world from the time of the Ascension, with the whole consent of the universal Church; as for obstinacy, he had no means of clearing himself but his own solemn word to the con-

trary, if they pleased to believe it: otherwise he was ready to confirm it by his oath.

His courageous constancy and wisdom so moved some of the judges that they wept to see such a man in danger of so infamous a death, contrary to the King's own promise. The jury, too, acted reluctantly, in fear of finding themselves in the same case if they refused to convict him.

At last a verdict of "Guilty" was returned. The Lord Chancellor called for silence, and announced the finding of the jury, bidding him speak if he had anything to say. The prisoner answered that if what he had already said was not sufficient he had no more to say; only to pray forgiveness for those who had condemned him, for he thought they knew not what they had done.

Then, in the solemn hush, the Chancellor pronounced the appalling sentence of death:

"You shall be led to the place from whence you came, and from thence shall be drawn through the city to the place of execution at Tyborne, where your body shall be hanged by the neck, and half alive you shall be cut down and thrown to the ground, your bowels to be taken out of your

body and burnt before you, being alive, your head to be smitten off, and your body to be divided into four quarters, and after, your head and quarters to be set up where the King shall appoint, and God have mercy on your soul."

The armed guard closed round the frail old man to take him back to the Tower, but first he asked leave to speak to the Commissioners. He thereupon referred the justice of his cause to God, to whose will he submitted himself entirely. Then, with the sublime courage and constancy which so distinguished him, the condemned man once again denied the King's claim to Supremacy, foretelling, if it were persisted in, the danger of Henry's own soul, the utter ruin of the realm committed to him, and the punishment of God. He ended with a prayer for the King's timely repentance.

The tragic procession reformed on its return to the Tower; despite the awful strain and fatigue of the trial, the broken old man was obliged to go part of the way on foot and part on horseback, surrounded by the weapons of the guard. At the gate of the prison, the Cardinal turned to thank them for the "great trouble and pains"

they had taken with him that day, adding pathetically :

"I am not able to give you anything in recompense, for I have nothing left, and, therefore, I pray accept in good part my hearty thanks."

He spoke with strong courage, so amiably, and "with so fresh and lively a colour, as he seemed rather to have come from a great feast or a banquet than from his arraignment," the joy of his approaching martyrdom shining in his happy face. As he crossed the drawbridge over the Tower moat, the crowd of men and women who had followed him cried out for his blessing in their grief. So his splendid progress ended, and he went back to his cell to prepare for death. In his hour of need, the confessor sent to him was Cranmer, the worthless, time-serving creature of the King.

The Cardinal spent the next four days in continual earnest prayer, not only calm and undismayed, but more joyful than he had been for long enough. Though he expected each day to be his last, he showed no inclination to distress himself over the suspense. A false rumour having circulated that his last day had actually arrived, the

prison cook prepared no dinner for him at the usual time. The Cardinal demanded an explanation of this, and when the cook told him of the common report, answered merrily :

" Well, for all that report thou seest me yet alive, and therefore, whatsoever news thou shalt hear of me hereafter, let me no more lack my dinner, but make it ready as thou art wont to do, and if thou see me dead when thou comest, then eat it thyself ; but I promise thee if I be alive, I mind by God's grace to eat never a bit the less."

There is a reminiscence of Thomas More's gay spirit in this speech ; and, indeed, these two chosen souls, long united in friendship and mutual love of learning and virtue, drew very near together during their preparation for martyrdom, which was to unite them inseparably, on the altars of the Church and for all eternity. The story of their sufferings and death is inextricably interwoven ; imprisoned in the same Tower which was so familiar to both in earlier days of Court duties, they fought in the same cause, were comforted by mutual friends, and exchanged little presents of food when such dainties came their way, like affectionate children. It was their interchange of

little notes of thanks and letters of mutual encouragement which immediately led to the opening of Fisher's trial, and it was through his friend's favourite daughter, Meg Roper, that John Fisher heard of the highest honour with which the Pope had crowned his noble career—the cardinalate. Though the ecclesiastic went to his eternal reward some two weeks before the layman, they were buried together in the Tower chapel, and three centuries later declared Blessed in the same Bull of Leo XIII.

The King was as eager for his old friend's death as was Fisher himself, and at last the writ was issued. The hideous sentence was altered to beheading; this being commonly believed to be solely because the frail old man would have died on the long way to Tyburn, thus balking the King's lust for vengeance.

The Lieutenant of the Tower received the writ in the evening, when it was very late, and his prisoner was asleep. He would not disturb him, but early on the morning of June 22 he went up to the cell in the Bell Tower and woke the old man, breaking the news carefully to him.

"Well," said Fisher, "if this be your errand, you bring me no great news, for

I have long time looked for this message." Then he added, from his heart: "I most humbly thank the King's Majesty that it pleaseth him to rid me from all this worldly business, and I thank you also for your tidings. But I pray you, Mr. Lieutenant, when is mine hour that I must go hence?"

He was told that it would be at nine.

"And what hour is it now?" he asked. It was about five o'clock.

"Well, then, let me, by your patience, sleep an hour or two, for I have slept very little this night, and yet, to tell you the truth, not for any fear of death, I thank God, but by reason of my great infirmity and weakness." Then, after some further conversation, he lay down again and slept soundly for over two hours.

When he rose at last, sending for his man, he told him to take away his hair-shirt secretly, and bring him a clean white shirt and his best clothes. Astonished at the uncommon pains he took over his toilet, the servant asked the reason, seeing that he knew that in two hours it must all come off and be lost to him.

"What of that?" said the Cardinal. "Dost thou not mark that this is our wedding day, and that it behoveth us, there-

fore, to use more cleanliness for solemnity of the marriage?"

(It was also the feast of our first martyr, St Alban.)

About nine o'clock the Lieutenant came for him; he found his prisoner nearly ready, promising to come "as fast as this thin body of mine will give me leave." Then he bade his man reach him his fur tippet to put round his neck; the Lieutenant remonstrated at all this care when scarcely an hour of life remained to him. Fisher answered that he meant to keep himself as well as he could till the very time of his execution, and though he thanked God that he was willing and anxious for death, "yet will I not willingly hinder my health in the meantime one minute of an hour, but still prolong the same as long as I can by such reasonable ways and means as almighty God hath provided for me." Doubtless he knew his own extreme exhaustion too well to run any risk of losing the glorious crown that was now within his reach.

At last all was ready. John Fisher took up a copy of the book he had loved and studied all his life long—the New Testament—and making a cross on his forehead, followed his gaoler out of the prison door.

But he was so weak that it was all he could do to get downstairs; the Lieutenant's men put him into a chair and carried him to the Tower gate, amid a marching forest of weapons, and delivered him to the Sheriffs of London to be put to death. When they came to the boundary of the Tower precincts, there was a halt, during which the old man descended from his chair, and, leaning against the wall, looked up to heaven and opened the book he carried with a very human little prayer that was answered instantly.

"O Lord," he said, "this is the last time that ever I shall open this book; let some comfortable place now chance unto me whereby I, thy poor servant, may glorify thee in this my last hour."

Then he glanced down at the page, and met the words: "This is life everlasting, that they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent. I have glorified thee upon the earth, I have finished the work that thou gavest me to do."

Shutting the book, he said: "Here is even learning enough for me to my life's end."

Then the Sheriffs' men came for him, and

a fresh contingent of armed men closed round the little procession; and so John Fisher reached his place of martyrdom, the scaffold on Tower Hill. The men offered to carry him up its steps, but he answered that he could shift for himself well enough, and went up without help, which the onlookers considered no small marvel in his state of weakness. As he mounted the steps, the sun shone out brightly in his face, and he murmured to himself: "Come ye to him and be enlightened: and your faces shall not be confounded."

By now it was about ten o'clock, and the executioner knelt before him to ask his pardon, according to custom.

"I forgive thee with all my heart," he said, "and I trust thou shalt see me overcome this storm lustily."

Then his fur tippet and gown were removed, and he stood up before the vast, intent crowd in his doublet and hose, so tall and slender and emaciated that the people marvelled at this living skeleton of a man, with his mighty spirit, "as it were Death in man's shape using a man's voice." Had he been in truth a traitor, it seemed incredible that the King should so put to death a dying man.

Presently he turned to address the crowd, and they deemed it miraculous that the voice which rang out from that terribly frail, thin form should be so loud and clear; many of them no doubt had a sudden memory of this famous preacher in earlier years discoursing at Paul's Cross or Westminster Abbey before the glittering Court on some State occasion. He was now about to make his last discourse from a far more glorious pulpit.

Telling the people that he died for the love of Christ and his holy Church—which he had always desired to do, if necessary—he begged them to pray God to grant constancy and firmness to his fragile flesh that he might suffer cheerfully. His one desire now was for final perseverance, that he might offer his last, supreme sacrifice for the great cause to which he had remained faithful unto death. The crown of life was at hand, and he dreaded lest at the last moment it should be lost or even tarnished by any weakness of his part.

The crowd watched, awestruck, listening to that pealing, courageous voice, watching the emaciated face of the worn old man, whose great eyes alone seemed to live in his gaunt face; they were shining now with

a solemn light that lit up his countenance with an unearthly glory.

He finished speaking and knelt down on the scaffold to pray aloud, concluding with the *Te Deum* and the psalm *In te Domine speravi*. The executioner approached and bound his eyes with a handkerchief as he prayed thus; then, as his first glimpse of heaven drew nigh, John Fisher raised up his longing heart and his hands, and, bowing down, laid his head on the block. The sharp axe whirled and came down, severing his head at one blow; and the martyr's blood flowed out before the people whose spiritual inheritance he had died to secure.

Henry's savage vengeance pursued his victim even beyond death. The holy body was shamefully ill-treated, and lay stripped naked on the scaffold till evening, guarded by armed men. When the order for burial came, two of the guard carried the body between them on a halberd to the churchyard of All-Hallows, Barking, and there, by the north wall, they dug a rough grave with their weapons, and, according to Henry's orders, the unclothed body was clumsily tumbled into the ground and covered with earth hastily shovelled over it.

The martyr's head was parboiled and set

up on a pole over London Bridge, with those of the Carthusians who had preceded him. And there, for fourteen hot June days, John Fisher's lifeless head remained, fresh complexioned and comely, so that the people watched for it to speak; as it grew more and more lifelike the wondering crowds gathered in such numbers that traffic could scarcely force a way over the bridge.

Perhaps it is not altogether fanciful to see another reason than the glory of martyrdom in this phenomenon. All the while that the staring crowds flocked to watch that blessed head, another martyr was suffering his passion between the Tower and Westminster Hall. John Fisher was waiting for his friend, and when, on July 6, Sir Thomas More met the same splendid death—with a jest upon his lips—at last this wonderful, radiant head was taken down, and, by the King's order, that of Sir Thomas was set up in its place. The faithful friends who had been united so closely throughout their life and martyrdom were together now for ever. Through the loving care of Margaret Roper, the body of her father's friend was taken up from its disgraceful rough grave at All-Hallows (and for seven years neither

leaf nor grass grew in that spot), and buried together with that of Sir Thomas More in the Tower church of St Peter ad Vincula, towards the west end by the belfry.

Christendom was struck with horror when the news spread abroad; and the martyr-Cardinal was compared with St Thomas of Canterbury, who had died in the very same cause.

Three centuries later, John Fisher's name headed the roll of martyrs beatified by Pope Leo XIII, followed immediately by that of Sir Thomas More, and since then the feast of the English Martyrs has been kept on May 4. Let all who love these two glorious martyrs, who died to secure the faith to us, pray that the day may soon come when we may honour them as canonised saints.

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Wilby, Noel Macdonald.
AUTHOR

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